“You can’t wrestle!” – Professional Wrestling as Participatory Fiction

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Käsillä oleva pro gradu -tutkielma koskee pohjoisamerikkalaista viihteen muotoa, jota suomeksi kutsutaan yleisesti joko showpainiksi tai ammattilaispainiksi (professional wrestling). Showpainissa kaksi (tai useampi) esiintyjä eli painija esittää yleisön edessä, painikehässä ja sen välittömässä läheisyydessä painiottelun, jonka voittaja on ennalta sovittu. Esitys on siten osa fiktiivistä kamppailu-urheilulajia, sillä ottelijat toimivat yhteistyössä kertoakseen yleisölle tarinan. Tutkielma keskittyykin showpainin fiktiivisyyteen ja tämän lisäksi siihen aktiiviseen osallistuvaan rooliin, joka showpainiesityksen yleisöllä on. Lopulta showpainia tarkastellaan osallistavan taiteen teorioiden valossa. Tutkielma pyrkii vastaamaan kysymykseen: *voiko showpaini toteuttaa osallistavan taiteen ideaalia?*

Vaikka tutkielman ensisijainen päämäärä ei ole esittää showpainille viihteen genrenä täydellistä selitystä, on showpaini estetiikan tutkielman aiheena kuitenkin niin vieras, että perusteellinen johdatus aiheeseen on tärkeä. Tämä on lukujen 1 ja 2 päämäärä. Luku 1 esittää showpainin historian Yhdysvalloissa ja luku 2 pyrkii kategorisoimaan genreä taiteiden kentässä. Luku 3 tarkastelee showpainia Kendall Waltonin kirjassa *Mimesis as Make-believe* (1990) muotoilemien fiktiivisyyden teorioiden kautta. Luvussa esitetään, että showpaini itseasiassa kuvaa yhtenäistä fiktiivistä maailmaa ja luku päättyy teesiin, jonka mukaan showpaini on myös historiallisesti ja orgaanisesti onnistunut nielaisemaan yleisönsä osaksi tätä esitettävää fiktiivistä maailmaa. Luku 4 on tiivis esitys tärkeimmistä osallistavan taiteen teorioista. Luvussa käytetyistä lähteistä tärkeimmät ovat Claire Bishopin *Artificial Hells* (2012) sekä Jacques Rancièren *The Emancipated Spectator.*(2011). Bishopin määritelmän mukaan osallistava taide on sellaista, jossa teoksen yleisö itsessään muodostaa teoksen pääasiallisen välineen ja materiaalin, kuten teatterissa ja muissa esitystaiteissa. Bishopin mukaan osallistavan taiteen päämäärät ovat passivoivan spektaakkelin sekä kapitalismin kritiikki. Rancièren mukaan osallistavan taiteen ideaali on ”uusi teatteri”, jossa yleisön rooli on olla aktiivinen ja radikaali yhteisö osana teosta, ja yhä pidemmälle vietynä teoksen olisi oltava osa sitä yhteisöä, jossa se esitetään. Luvun 4 lopullinen teesi on, että taidemaailma epäonnistuu kategorisesti luomaan aitoa rancièrilaista uutta teatteria, sillä taidemaailma olettaa tietynlaisen valtasuhteen taiteilijan ja yleisön välille, eikä tämä valtasuhde anna sijaa Rancièren ihannoimalle ”ennalta-arvaamattomalle subjektille”. Luku 5 tutkii showpainiyleisön roolia esityksessä, joka sille laitetaan esille. Luku sisältää selostuksen showpainin osallistavista elementeistä sekä yleisön merkityksestä televisioidulle showpainille. Luku keskittyy erityisesti tuoreisiin showpainiyleisön osallistumiseen liittyviin ilmiöihin esimerkkitapausten kautta. Esimerkeistä käy ilmi se valta, joka showpainiyleisöllä orgaanisesti on sille esitetyn fiktiivisen maailman ylle. Lopulta luku 5 tarkastelee showpainia Bishopin ja Rancièren muotoilemien osallistavan taiteen ideaalien kautta.

Tutkielman loppupäätelmä on, että vaikka showpaini epäonnistuu saavuttamaan useita osallistavan taiteen ideaaleja, on siinä potentiaalia tullakseen esimerkiksi rancièriläisestä uudesta teatterista. Tämä johtuu siitä, että toisin kuin osallistavassa taiteessa, jossa taiteilijan ja yleisön roolit ovat erikseen määritettyjä erikoissopimuksia, on showpainissa yleisöllä erityistä valtaa, sillä se on luonnollinen osa sille esitettyä fiktiivistä maailmaa. Showpainiyleisö ajoittain tulee aktiiviseksi ja radikaaliksi yhteisöksi osana teosta, ja tämä on Rancièrelle osallistavan taiteen ideaali. Täten osallistavalla taiteella olisi opittavaa showpainista.

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showpaini, ammattilaispaini, paini, fiktio, osallistava taide, Rancière, Bishop, Walton

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

The thesis at hand regards the form of performance called “professional wrestling”. A professional wrestling match is where two (or more) performers or wrestlers perform a bout with a predetermined outcome in and in the close proximity of a wrestling ring in front of a live audience. Thus, the performance is a part of a fictional combat sport, where the combatants work together in order to tell a story. This thesis concentrates on the fictionality of professional wrestling but also on the role of the live audience which is active and participatory. Lastly, professional wrestling is examined in the light of theories regarding participatory art. The primary research question of this thesis is the following: *can professional wrestling realize the potentials of participatory art?*

Even though the primary goal of this thesis is not to offer an absolute explanation of the phenomenon of professional wrestling, it is a rather alien subject in aesthetics. Thus, the goals of chapters 1 and 2 are to explain the history of professional wrestling in the United States and to attempt to categorize it in the field of the arts. In chapter 3 professional wrestling is examined in the light of Kendall Walton’s theories on fiction formatted in his *Mimesis as Make-believe* (1992). The chapter states that professional wrestling presents a uniform fictional world. Chapter 3 concludes in the idea that professional wrestling has in fact historically and organically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents. Chapter 4 is a summary of the main theories regarding participatory art, the main sources on this subject being Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells* (2012) and Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011). According to Bishop’s definition, participatory art is such where people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theater and performance. Bishop argues that the main motive of participatory art is a critique of spectacle and capitalism. According to Rancière, the ideal of participatory art is a “new theater”, where the audience’s role is to be an active and radical community audience, and even further, where the piece of art is a part of said community. The main thesis of chapter 4 is that the artworld fails to realize the ultimate goals of participatory art, for the artworld presupposes a certain power dynamic between the artist and the audience, and this dynamic leaves no room for a rancièrian “unpredictable subject”. Chapter 5 examines the role of the professional wrestling audience in the performance it is presented with. The chapter includes a thorough explanation on the participatory elements in professional wrestling and the significance of the audience regarding televised professional wrestling. The chapter especially concentrates on recent phenomena in the participation of the professional wrestling audience through case studies. The examples echo the notion that the professional wrestling audience has power that is the product of the fact that the professional wrestling audience is an element of a fictional world. Finally, chapter 5 examines professional wrestling through the ideals of participatory art formatted by Bishop and Rancière.

The thesis concludes in the notion that even though professional wrestling fails to realize several ideals of participatory art, it has the potential to become an example of a rancièrian new theater. This is because unlike in participatory art where the dynamic between the artist and the audience is dictated by auxiliary contracts, in professional wrestling the audience has power which is a natural part of the fictional world presented to it. At times the professional wrestling audience can become an active and radical community audience, which is the ideal of participatory art according to Rancière. Thus, participatory art may have things to learn from professional wrestling.

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professional wrestling, fiction, participation, participatory art, Rancière, Bishop, Walton

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Contents

Introduction: what is professional wrestling?

The crowd is conditioned to erupt in a unified roar when the first chord of a rock song fills the arena. All eyes are on the elevated stage on the narrow side of the building where a giant video screen is showing clips of a man posing and fighting edited to coincide with the music. From behind the screen the very man appears and now the audience is even louder. He is clad in iconic "cool guy" paraphernalia: a long black leather jacket and sunglasses. His hair is long and inexplicably wet. Under the jacket he is bare chested, and he is wearing colorful spandex tights. In any other world this man would be an utter joke, a weirdo, but not in this one and not among these people. After the man has acknowledged the crowd in a vacant manner he cups his hands and in an act of rhetorical ego he yells: "What's my name!" The crowd surely knows it but does not reply. Satisfied with the lack of response, the man begins to walk down a slanted steel ramp to the center of the arena where he is about to do his thing. His stage is a 20-foot by 20-foot elevated ring encompassed by ropes. This is the canvas of fictional battle.

The thesis at hand concerns the uniquely American[1] form of performance that is professional wrestling. It is a rich mixture of combat sport, theater, dance, and finally performance art. A professional wrestling show depicts a fictional sporting event featuring usually several predetermined matches in a fictional combat sport called "professional wrestling". The matches revolve around several intertwined story arcs or "storylines", the central story being the battle between the protagonist or hero (in wrestling parlance the "babyface" or simply the "face") and the antagonist or villain (in wrestling parlance the "heel"). Most often the story engines are a fictional wrestling championship, honor, or money that the characters fight for. The mainstream wrestling scene in America is dominated in

[1] This thesis will concentrate on the American style of professional wrestling although the genre has localized styles all over the world: most notably Mexico and Japan.

2018 by WWE[2] which produces several weekly wrestling television shows that can be described as "masculine melodramas" (Jenkins 2005, 33). Indeed, in its core, professional wrestling is a morality play or as Roland Barthes (2005, 23) famously described it as a "spectacle of excess".

The central element of the morality play, or the "masculine melodrama", however is the professional wrestling match that is a rich and complex form of performance. As said above, in a professional wrestling match two or more men or women perform an often partly choreographed but also often improvised match with a predetermined outcome in a fictional combat sport called "wrestling". Wrestling in this form can have very little in common with the legitimate sport of wrestling seen for instance as an event in the Olympic Games. The professional wrestling match is performed inside and in the close periphery of a wrestling ring: a platform that resembles a boxing ring (although the ropes of the ring are wound tighter for more bounce). The fictional rules of a wrestling match vary, but generally the victor is the wrestler who "pins" his or her opponent, meaning that the opponent's shoulders must be pressed against the mat until the referee has count to three. Alternatively, a wrestler can force his or her opponent to "submit" which means forcing the opponent to concede defeat in a painful wrestling hold. A wrestling match can also be lost via disqualification. The rules of the fictional wrestling match act as a framework of the stories depicted in and around the match and they are routinely broken in order to drive the stories forward. Essentially, a professional wrestling match depicts stories of triumph of the human will in a form of performance that is ever evolving.

What is particularly interesting in professional wrestling though is the participatory habits of its audiences, and the primary research question of the thesis at hand is the following: *can professional wrestling realize the potentials of participatory art?* According to Claire Bishop (see 4.1) participatory art is such that uses its audience as a central medium, engaging it as opposed to merely

[2] Short for World Wrestling Entertainment.

providing it with a passivating spectacle. However, it seems that participatory art is a rather paradoxical phenomenon, as it aims to integrate itself with its audience but fails because the audience is always an outside entity from the artwork. In this thesis I argue that professional wrestling gives its audience the power to pursue true participation, and that this power is a built-in element of the genre. Essentially, I argue that professional wrestling has organically and historically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents, and this fact gives the professional wrestling audience power inside the fictional world.

Professional wrestling is a fairly alien subject in the field of aesthetics. Even though an absolute explanation of the genre of professional wrestling or a thorough analysis of professional wrestling as a performance are not the main focuses of this thesis, it is integral that I give an account on the history of professional wrestling as well as an attempt to categorize it as a genre of entertainment. This is the focus of chapters 1 and 2. Because I argue that the participatory potential of professional wrestling is realized through its fictionality, in chapter 3 I expound upon the theories of make-believe, fiction, and representational arts by Kendall Walton. Furthermore, I analyze the fictional world of wrestling. Chapter 4 is a summary on the theories concerning art and participation by Claire Bishop and Jacques Rancière. This leads to chapter 5 which is a thorough examination and analysis of recent participatory trends in professional wrestling in the light of the ideals presented by Bishop and Rancière.

Mainstream wrestling (in other words the television product presented by WWE) is often ridiculed and criticized for being violent, degenerate, childish, and more or less merely a “fake sport”. On the surface this is true, but professional wrestling is not such at its finest. Therefore, the secondary goal of this thesis is to open a conversation about an analysis of professional wrestling that, instead of focusing on the “masculine melodrama”, focuses on the rich and complex form of performance in the professional wrestling match and around it. This form of

performance indeed seems to transcend fiction, but it also seems to be a worthy challenge to both art analysis and sports analysis.

1. A brief history of professional wrestling

1.1 Introduction: on the reliability of sources

Reliable accounts on the history of professional wrestling are sparse and mired with legend and hearsay. This is because for decades, professional wrestlers and promoters protected their livelihood with tales and lies about the true nature of their industry. No historian was granted access to the inner workings of a fake sport and even the several exposés and whistleblower accounts of this era used in the research of this study should be dealt with certain reservations. Wrestling has its roots partly in carnival culture that is notorious for its secret insider lingo, hermetic networking, and pursuit of profit. If you are not a wrestler or a promoter, you are a customer, "a mark" that is purely there in order to be deceived for a pay day. This was the philosophy of wrestlers for a long time to the extent that one must not put too much confidence into most autobiographical or biographical accounts. Stories sell books and wrestlers do not shy away from telling stories. In a crude way, wrestlers are pathological liars who derive pleasure from being smarter than the people they are fooling.

Be that as it may, a few recent, trustworthy, and well researched histories about the origins of professional wrestling have been written. David Shoemaker's T*he Squared Circle* is the most noted one albeit quite popularized. *Ringside* written by historian Scott M. Beekman is more academically credible. What should become abundantly clear throughout this study is that in professional wrestling the legend is as much or even more important than object reality. The evolution of the genre feeds off its mythology and reinvents itself again and again not based on what happened but based on what was said to have happened. This is true of all history but in professional wrestling the truth is even more irrelevant.

1.2 Sincere beginnings: professional wrestling as legitimate competition

The history of wrestling is as old as written legend itself. There is a lengthy account of a wrestling match (with specific wrestling holds described) in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where the titular king grappled with the feared fighter Enkidu (Blomquist 2015). The ancient Olympics famously hosted wrestling tournaments and the most significant wrestler of this era was Milo of Croton who won six consecutive men's titles. Not unlike with most wrestlers of the sport's more recent golden ages, Milo's life story is more myth than reality. Allegedly the champion died due to being devoured by a pack of wolves. Even though Milo was a dominant champion wrestler, he did not take part in the most ultraviolent combat sport of the day, pankration, which often resulted in combatants injured or even dead. When the Romans took the Greek tradition of sport out of its religious setting, they turned athletics into a spectacle. Pankration was a good fit but eventually it was marginalized due to grander shows such as chariot racing and gladiator contests. Combat sports, wrestling in particular, met a centuries long age of obscurity, during which only local competitions were held and no one wrestler gained wide renown. As byproducts of military training though, several European styles of wrestling were cultivated, and they would in time find their way into the melting pot that was the New World. (Beekman 2006, 2–5.)

Wrestling eventually made its way to America with European immigrants. When the civil war guns went silent in 1865, America was desperate for ways to unite and sports heroes were prime subjects for adulation both in the south and the north. America was becoming the promised land of professional sports, where a skilled and dedicated athlete could gain fame, money, and the American dream. The country just needed a unifying sport. (Ibid., 10–11.) In the latter part of the 19th century, wrestling was first and foremost a clash of three distinct styles: Irish collar-and-elbow, Greco-Roman wrestling and catch wrestling.

Collar-and-elbow was the first style to gain prominence during the civil war as it was used as a pastime among Union solders. After the war ended, a shared strict ruleset for matches had spread across the country and collar-and-elbow became the preferred athletic endeavor among veterans. (Ibid., 11.) In 1867 the first American collar-and-elbow champion was crowned in New Yorker James MacLaughlin, and in 1870, after retaining the championship in a tournament, he was awarded a diamond championship belt. This tradition of champions carrying ornamental belts has prevailed to this day. Collar-and-elbow had strict rules. The beginning stance, which also gave the style its name, was not to be broken intentionally but forced by the opponent. This meant that the combatants could at times remain standing up to an hour and the action was often nonexistent. It was no surprise, then, that collar-and-elbow quickly became stale and secondary to a new style from continental Europe – Greco-Roman wrestling. (Ibid., 16–17.)

Despite its name, Greco-Roman wrestling was in fact developed in France and had little to do with the style of the ancient Olympic games. Erroneous or not, the name gave the style prestige and a flair of the ancient world and it became the prominent style in America. This was in part due to the ruleset that allowed more freedom to perform holds and that favored stronger heavyweights. Often this made Greco-Roman matches battles between larger than life giants. The popularizer of the new style was William Muldoon who is also often called “the father of American wrestling”. The muscular Muldoon toured the country in the 1880s with troupes of strongmen and other wrestlers, performing, posing, and taking local challenges in wrestling matches. When the competition was poor. and matches became uneventful and one sided, Muldoon started to “carry” lesser opponents to more exciting matches in order to make more money. (Ibid., 13–26.) This practice and the techniques conceived by Muldoon would eventually result

in the birth of the art of "working"[3] a match. Muldoon essentially was the first modern professional wrestler, giving legitimate competition a flair of theater. It is worth mentioning that the travelling troupe is also the way that wrestling is promoted today.

As competitive Greco-Roman wrestling benefited those with great upper body strength and mass, wrestlers were becoming bigger and more lumbering. Matches were also starting to take multiple hours as competition became stiffer. For example, William Muldoon's title defense against Clarence "Kansas Demon" Whistler was called a draw after the men grappled for eight hours (Ibid., 25). Attendances were stagnating due to the entertainment value being low. Even though Greco-Roman wrestling became the chosen discipline of the new fin-de-siècle Olympic games and thereafter the dominant amateur style in the world, a new American style was emerging alongside Greco-Roman that would change the professional game – catch wrestling. Whereas Greco-Roman barred holds below the waist, catch allowed all holds. This resulted in speed and technique becoming the key to winning matches so it promoted a faster and more dynamic style of combat. Catch was also regarded as an American sport, a status that both Greco-Roman and collar-and-elbow were lacking. Even though in reality catch was as un-American as both rivaling styles, this air of nationality gave it an edge. As it also benefited smaller, quicker, more skilled combatants, it was regarded as more democratic and hence more American. (Ibid., 37.)

The saturation point of the popularity of the legitimate competition of professional wrestling came in the years 1908 and 1911 when the American Frank Gotch took on the first world champion wrestler George Hackenschmidt in front of sellout crowds in Chicago, Illinois. Hackenschmidt, also known as the Russian Lion, was an international celebrity who had earned his title in matches

[3] "Working" is performing a match with a fixed outcome, in other words what professional wrestling is today. "A work" also means any aspect of a performance that is part of the show and therefore not real i.e. "that punch was a work".

in both Europe and the United States (ibid., 46). According to Shoemaker (2014, 31), when Hackenschmidt arrived stateside for his match against Gotch in 1908, he was surprised that he had been promoted in America as an evil foreigner taking on the hero in Gotch. It was not the first time that the foreign menace angle had been used to sell tickets, but in a legitimate world championship wrestling match this was an unprecedented tactic. Hackenschmidt eventually lost the match by conceding victory to Gotch in between rounds and Gotch became a folk hero for vanquishing the foreign foe. Post-match Hackenschmidt would go to accuse Gotch for cheating and using oil to prevent holds, although whether Hackenschimdt himself said this or not is disputed. The promotion for the eventual 1911 rematch had already begun. The return bout was again held in Chicago and the newspapers trumpeted it as a "clash of modern giants" and "something out of Homer's Iliad". Only this time Hackenschmidt arrived out of shape and injured and the match was an unequivocal fiasco. Gotch beat the downtrodden and unmotivated Hackenschmidt in quick fashion and the 30.000 paying spectators were outraged. The match was the most profitable in American sports history, but it also did irreparable harm to the popularity of wrestling. (Beekman 2006, 49–50.) The two Gotch-Hackenschmidt matches were legitimate sporting contests that were backed by huge promotional machines. What the two wrestlers accomplished was an almost mythological backstory for modern professional wrestling. It is not unusual to hear either man's name from the mouth of a wrestling commentator in 2018, for both Gotch and Hackenschmidt represent a golden age in wrestling's legitimacy as a sport. Eventually however, it was realized that legitimate contests rarely meet expectations when the promotion promises real life mythological battles. Legitimate competitive wrestling would never gather as much interest as it did with the Gotch-Hackenschmidt clashes. Wrestling would need to take a step back, reinvent itself once again, and embrace deceit in favor of integrity.

1.3 From sport to theater

While wresting was struggling as a legitimate sport of the masses, it was thriving as a carnival sideshow (Shoemaker 2014, 14). The matches held at carnivals were basically exhibitions, short affairs with fixed outcomes. This developed new techniques that were used to give the spectators believable but spectacular finishes to matchups. These included mostly painful-looking submission holds and the masters of these maneuvers were called "hookers". Hookers could believably beat much larger opponents simply by applying a hold that could force the opponent to quit in pain or even pass out. (Ibid., 39–40.) One of these famed hookers was Ed "Strangler" Lewis (named after his feared choke hold) who eventually parlayed his success on the carnival circuit into a world championship reign in 1920. By then, legitimate competition in wrestling had more or less already seized to exist apart from occasional double crosses where wrestlers would attempt to capture victories by going against the promoter's preordained plans. As a world class grappler and skilled hooker, Lewis brought stability into the revived business of show as he was able to fend off double crossers if needed. Lewis would partner up with the promoter Billy Sandow and also with wrestler Toots Mondt, the latter of which was arguably the most influential mind in early professional wrestling history. According to Shoemaker (2014, 19), Mondt was the visionary behind most of the storytelling aspects in professional wrestling that are in use to this day. For instance, Mondt had the idea to build drama in matches and end them in fulfilling ways. He essentially started to choreograph matches into stories, with beginnings and middles that would eventually build up into spectacular endings. Mondt would also occasionally give the fans unsatisfactory finishes, such as double count outs and disqualifications, just to build up interest for an even bigger rematch. Mondt, Sandow, and Lewis were later dubbed the Gold Dust Trio, due to the show business magic they managed to perform in the ring. (Ibid., 18–19).

As in-ring action became more and more implausible and fantastical, it was no surprise that the sports media quickly turned suspicious. However, the sports culture of the early 20th century overall had been mired in scandals of betting fraud and match fixing, most prominently in boxing (Beekman 2006, 41). No sport was particularly credible in the eyes of the media. So, when New Yorker magazine printed an exposé on the nature of the wrestling business in 1931, rather than conveying a sense of outrage, it covered the subject with a certain air of levity (Shoemaker 2014, 25):

> *Not the least interesting of all the minor phenomena produced by the current fashion of wrestling is the universal discussion as to the honesty of the matches. And certainly, the most interesting phase of this discussion is the unanimous agreement: "Who cares if they're fixed or not – the show is good."*

Shoemaker notes (2014, 25) that the popular misconception is that wrestling fans have been unaware of the deceitful nature of the business for the longest time, but in fact, the fans have been in on the ruse from the start. Shoemaker may give the wrestling audience a bit too much credit, but the fact is that the fans never seemed to mind whether they were being fooled or not.

Wrestling may have had sincere beginnings, but it always developed with the business of show as the primary objective. When collar-and-elbow was too rigid of a sport to be entertaining, Greco-Roman with its larger than life heavyweight battles was the next attraction. When Greco-Roman proved to be boring, the dynamic catch style was the answer to drawing bigger crowds. And when legitimate sport failed altogether to garner a large following, wrestlers and promoters had no qualms in turning to carnival tricks and smoke and mirrors to entertain the fans and glean monetary success. Wrestling did not become fake at any precise moment in time. Rather, as Shoemaker notes (2014, 29), wrestling was always a sideshow, an act where the focus has always been on exploiting the fans and not in the spirit of competition. The fans just seemed to be indifferent to being exploited. They got a show, and the show was about to get even bigger thanks to a new medium.

1.4 Advent of television

The first televised sports event in America was an experimental broadcast from a baseball game in 1939. According to Beekman (2006, 81), approximately 1.000 homes viewed the game, but complained that the broadcast was unwatchable and that the action was impossible to follow due to low picture quality. Primitive television technology simply was not equipped to broadcast team sports. Wrestling shows, however, were smaller scale productions that offered the networks low-cost programming. Wrestling was also live programming in an age where video tape had not yet been invented, and Hollywood was tentative in offering a rival medium any filmed material to broadcast. Ironically, in 1945, a Los Angeles local network started to air a weekly wrestling program from a sound stage in Hollywood and by 1948 wrestling was a part of prime-time programming on all national stations. Post-World War II America was hungry for sports programming that celebrated masculinity and America's global power, and wrestling offered a prime canvas for such stories. Television wrestling started to bring forth the characters and personas of the wrestlers through interviews and colorful commentary tracks. (Ibid., 81–82.) Wrestling was slowly evolving into the melodrama that is episodic professional wrestling, but it was very much still presented as sport. The similarity in production to other sports programming re-established its faux legitimacy as competitive sport to the extent that to this day wrestling is listed mostly as sports programming, not episodic fiction.

Televised wrestling benefited those wrestlers who were able to create larger-than-life characters. One such over the top television wrestler was "Gorgeous" George Wagner who eventually transcended the wrestling world and became arguably the first national television star. Wagner originally portrayed a conventional clean-cut athlete but did not garner much success as such. He revolutionized the wrestling business when he started to portray an effeminate prima donna who wore flamboyant robes, had his hair bleached and curled, and

entered the arena to the tune of Sir Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*. Wagner would often promote his matches with radio interviews that were conducted in hair salons. His antics struck a chord with blue collar America in such a way that he became the most hated man on television while at the same time his appearances sold tickets and drew enormous viewership numbers. (Shoemaker 2014, 50–52.) Shoemaker states (2014, 52) that Gorgeous George was the first wrestler to dawn the proverbial Greek mask and perform for the back row as if on a Broadway stage. Wagner was the blueprint of the character-driven wrestler that is the norm in professional wrestling today. However, in a way, he was a man before his time. Hyper-masculinity and supposed athletic legitimacy would still be the lay of the land for decades. Yet, according to Beekman (2006, 88), Gorgeous George did usher in the era where being a wrestling champion would reflect a wrestler's ability to draw money rather than his status as the world's greatest wrestler. This is a philosophy very much prevalent today.

1.5 The NWA and the territory era

By the mid 1950's television technology had evolved to the point where team sports such as baseball and football nudged wrestling out of vogue. Wrestling would remain on local television stations, but the mentality was that wrestling on free television would hinder the public's eagerness to buy tickets. This reduced televised wrestling into a mean of promoting live events, and the shows featured only short and unspectacular jobber[4] matches of little or no consequences. This practice of promoting untelevised events on television would prevail well into the late 20th century. By the 1950's the American wrestling scene was controlled by the National Wrestling Alliance or NWA. NWA was effectively a cartel of local promotions that divided the country into territories that were not to compete

[4] A "jobber" is a wrestler whose main role is to lose matches or in other words to "do the job".

with each other. The cartel also recognized a shared world champion that would tour the country and defend his title in the local promotions. For the most of the 1950's and early 1960's the NWA world champion was Lou Thesz, a clean-cut athlete and skilled grappler with rugged movie-star good looks. Thesz was, in a way, a continuation of the ilk of Gotch and Hackenschmidt as a man that could potentially hold his own in a legitimate fight, which did occur from time to time. (Beekman 2006, 89). Thesz's legitimacy fed the myth of wrestling as a true competition. He wrestled in a way that was both entertaining and believable. One can argue that Thesz and his kind set wrestling back many years to the days before Gorgeous George, to a day when wrestling was a competition. The problem was that it was not. NWA was adamant in its stance that wrestling's mendacious nature should be protected and kept under a veil of secrecy. For instance, when the cartels' unscrupulous business dealings went under scrutiny by the federal authorities' anti-trust policies in 1956, NWA quickly and quietly settled out of court to avoid acknowledging under oath that the matches are fixed (Ibid., 98-99). According to Shoemaker (2014, 25), it had not been a secret for decades, so one can only wonder if this was an antiquated philosophy. It was no wonder that NWA's monopoly on the national wrestling scene was fading by the mid 1960's.

In 1963 NWA's most profitable territory, Capitol Wrestling, which promoted in the northeastern part of the country, seceded from NWA. Capitol had a lucrative local television deal and an exclusive right to run the sports and entertainment mecca of New York's Madison Square Garden. The promotion was run by Vincent J. McMahon and Toots Mondt, one third of the revolutionary Gold Dust Trio. Capitol also changed its name into the more grandiose World Wide Wrestling Federation or WWWF and started to recognize its own world championship rather than the NWA world championship. This forced NWA to focus on its more profitable southern states and a dichotomy of southern and northern wrestling was born. (Beekman 2006, 107.) The rivalry between NWA (later World Championship Wrestling or WCW) and WWWF (later simply WWF)

would dominate the wrestling scene for the rest of the 20th century and it would not come to a conclusion until 2001.

1.6 The rise of Vince McMahon

In 1976, the television tycoon and devoted wrestling fan Ted Turner brought NWA's most profitable local wrestling program, Georgia Championship Wrestling, to prime time on Saturday evenings and it quickly became the nation's most viewed wrestling program. By the 1980's the show had ascended to such extent that it changed its name to World Championship Wrestling and became a hot spot for all NWA action. (Beekman 2006, 113–114).

The WWF on the other hand had gone under the control of Vincent J. McMahon's son Vincent K. McMahon (affectionately called just Vince). Vince McMahon had a grand vision of wrestling. He often tells the anecdote that when his friend and rival Ted Turner called him to gloat that he, too, is in the "rasslin' business" Vince quipped: "That's nice, Ted. I'm in the entertainment business." (Shoemaker 2014, 260). McMahon coined the term "sports entertainment" to be used in lieu of the word "wrestling", earning him the ire of professional wrestling purists (Hoy-Browne 2014). In an interview for the documentary film *Beyond the Mat* in 1997, McMahon states with relative impudence: "We make movies" (Blaustein 1999).

In the spring of 1985 McMahon put his creative and financial efforts into the production of *Wrestlemania*, a live spectacular that was broadcast live from Madison Square Garden. Wrestlemania was an extensive venture and a gamble for McMahon, who would have effectively gone bankrupt if the show had failed. The event was inundated with celebrity appearances, co-promoted with Music Television, and headlined by McMahon's chosen superheroesque protagonist, Hulk Hogan. In a way, Wrestlemania was a wrestling event in name only: the

matches were short and lacked the grit and athleticism of the NWA alternative. However, it was all about the spectacle and ultimately Wrestlemania was a prominent success and ushered in an era of profitable televised wrestling. (Shoemaker 2014, 120–121.) WWF's and WCW's weekly free television shows would now build excitement not solely for untelevised events but for several annual pay-per-views as well, viewable from the comfort of one's home.

In 1993 McMahon's WWF debuted a weekly prime-time cable program called *Monday Night Raw* on the USA network. The concept borrowed heavily from rival WCW in that it filmed in a smaller, intimate studio rather than in an arena (Ibid., 259). Production values were prominent, and the program grabbed the viewer's attention with fast action, loud music, bright colors, and over-the-top characters. In essence, Raw was futuristic in that it was from the past: it featured long, competitive matches instead of short jobber matches. The notion was that wrestling would drive television ratings and thus be so profitable for the television network that it would pay the wrestling company a considerable rights fee for producing it. The idea was elementary, but it had not been attempted on this scale before. Not to be outdone, in 1995, WCW (that had by now completely severed its ties with the NWA and was operating independently) went head-to-head with WWF with its new prime time show *WCW Monday Nitro* and fired the first proverbial shot in the ratings battle that later became known as the "Monday night wars" (Beekman 2006, 133).

The two shows fought over viewers for years with outlandish stunts, by poaching each other's contracted wrestlers, with sexual content, and with otherwise racier material. This brought unprecedented, mostly negative, attention to wrestling (see e.g. Parents Television Council 2000). The era was nevertheless extremely lucrative for McMahon and the wrestling business as a whole. In 2001, WWF prevailed in the "Monday night wars" when WCW Monday Nitro was cancelled. At this point WCW was owned by Turner whose television company merged with America On-Line (AOL). The merger pushed Turner, the

devoted wrestling fan and WCW's patron saint, out of day-to-day operations and WCW was fair game for television industry dealings. AOL then sold all of WCW's assets for less than $3 million to McMahon, who effectively now owned his only competition.

1.7 Modern day: WWE vs. "the independents"

Since 2001 WWF (now WWE) has been the dominant national wrestling company. In 1999 the company went public on the New York Stock Exchange and has since begun ventures into wrestling related reality television and Hollywood action films starring WWE wrestlers, finally making McMahon's dream of "making movies" a reality. After WCW halted operations, an upstart company named Total Non-stop Action or TNA started in 2002 to promote shows with the formerly significant NWA. TNA has had numerous national television deals but so far it has failed to become considerable competition for WWE. (Beekman 2006, 145.) Another American wrestling promotion called Ring of Honor is fairly prominent and has a weekly television program in syndication, but it lacks the brand recognition and production values of WWE to become attractive to nothing but the most zealous wrestling fan.

In 2014, WWE launched a video-on-demand Internet service called WWE Network. The de facto "Netflix of wrestling" has become the home of WWE's former live PPV shows and hosts most of the video archive WWE owns. Now, in 2018, WWE produces a total of five hours of live television programming each week for the USA Network as well as anywhere between two and ten hours of live wrestling for the WWE Network. In a way, WWE has oversaturated the main stream wrestling market so that no competitor can glean traction in the business. To the casual viewer, WWE has become synonymous with the word "wrestling", whether Vince McMahon likes the word or not.

This is not to say that there is nothing else out there. WWE may define mainstream professional wrestling, but there is a vibrant scene of so-called independent wrestling in the United States as well as in other parts of the world. The independents or the "indies" are locally based promotions that only seldom run shows, some once a month, some even more infrequently. A handful of the more prominent promotions are able to run once a week. Often operating on shoe string budgets, independent promotions mostly employ aging veterans, experienced performers looking to get noticed, and beginners who are trying to cut their teeth. According to Laurence De Garis, a former wrestler turned academic, being an independent wrestler is not a full-time career for employment opportunities are limited and sparse. (De Garis 2005, 198–199.) The landscape has evolved in the past decade, however, and a few prominent performers have found ways to thrive outside of WWE. For instance, the duo of brothers Matt and Nick Jackson (professionally known as the Young Bucks) are in such high demand in the independent circuit that they have claimed the epithet "the kings of the indies" (Oster 2005). That being said, performers like the Jacksons are an anomaly, and most independent wrestlers do fit the romanticized mold of the starving artist.

In the past few decades, the dominant style of professional wrestling in North America has further evolved from the catch-style described in 1.2. Traditional wrestling action is now, for instance, peppered with martial arts kicks and often unrealistic high-flying maneuvering (more on this evolution in 2.3). These new styles have been brought to the forefront by Japanese and Mexican styles as well as by independent wrestling, and they have highly influenced the dominant style in WWE as well. Be that as it may, the WWE style is still rather conventional compared to the flashy risk-taking seen on the indie scene. Mainstream versus the avant-garde is quite the prominent dichotomy in professional wrestling.

The main goal of the majority of independent wrestlers is to become mainstream successes and this means getting noticed by WWE. Through the advent of the internet, wrestlers find it possible to gain international renown and some can build notable cult followings as matches, interview segments, and other material spread like wildfire in Internet wrestling communities. More than ever before, WWE has begun to take notice of the Internet and currently employs several former "kings of the indies." In the past, such moniker would have more or less worked against the performer because WWE has historically preferred to create their own stars. Some current WWE performers' characters, such as Kevin Owens (formerly Kevin Steen), are essentially extensions of their independent characters, and a select few, such as AJ Styles and Samoa Joe, have even gotten to keep their former character names.

The independent wrestling scene has in fact become so influential to professional wrestling as a whole that WWE in effect created their own "independent" brand in 2012 and started to produce a standalone wrestling program called *NXT*. While WWE is mainstream wrestling, NXT caters especially to the zealous wrestling fan by being edgier and more adult-oriented. (Windsor 2016.) In NXT, WWE has created the "super indie", a brand that is able to be underground and anti-establishment while in fact being backed by a multimillion dollar company. Thus, NXT is able to create new stars who then "graduate" to WWE with popularity among the most influential and passionate fans. One could call this late capitalism. One could call this absurd. One could also just call this wrestling.

2. Professional wrestling as performance

2.1 Introduction: categorizing professional wrestling

As long as the genre of entertainment called "professional wrestling" has been recognized, there have been fans that take it extremely seriously. This is in part due to the fact that being open about a fandom of professional wrestling usually raises questions and often fosters ridicule. Reporter John Stossel, in an attempt to out the mendacious nature of professional wrestling, took to the streets of New York City after a WWF wrestling show in 1985. He asked passing fans, "You know it's fake, right?" Some more naive spectators still thought professional wrestling had legitimacy as a competitive sport. Most did not. "Apparently this is what the public wants", he said in an outrage. (Mazer 1998, 156.)

Over 30 years later, no such debate of legitimacy prevails. Professional wrestling's true nature as a simulated competition and as a form of performance has been uncovered long ago. Most performers and promoters today talk openly about their craft and let fans in on the process through candid interviews which sometimes are even distributed through the same channels as the wrestling product. When it comes to professional wrestling, artistic introspection and analysis of one's performance have become a product to be sold to fans side by side with the art itself. Insider knowledge of the process has become a form of cultural capital that forms the basis of the deep analysis and discourse that the fans take part in (Mazer 1998, 160). This is not unlike what is customary with more universally celebrated forms of culture and art.

When one explores academic literature on professional wrestling, it becomes apparent that almost all of it is written with a special attitude of aloofness. For instance, Sharon Mazer's influential work is described as an ethnographical account (Chow et al. 2017, 1). As she is an academic and a theater studies authority, Mazer's look at professional wrestling is from the outside.

Professional wrestling is as foreign to her as an indigenous culture could be to an anthropologist. In a way it is alien culture, even though it could originate from her home town.

For Mazer (1998, 21), professional wrestling is not legitimate theater, but it does not seem to be anything specific at all. However, if professional wrestling aims to be taken into the sphere of genuine art theory, it seems necessary for it to be categorized as something specific. In the following chapter, I will gather the plethora of prevailing categorizations of the genre and attempt to make a conclusive argument that professional wrestling is a unique form of performance.

2.2 Wrestling as sport

The most obvious word to describe professional wrestling with is sport, for a professional wrestling show is presented as sport from almost all aspects. This is apparent from the sports related vernacular that is used in relation to professional wrestling. For instance, a single professional wrestling act is not called a "performance" but a "match". Also, the lineup of presented matches is not called a "programme" or a "playbill", as in concerts or in theater. Instead, it is referred to as the "card", as it is in boxing (Sammond 2005, 343). This vernacular is used by performers, promoters, wrestling reporters, and fans alike. That being said, the discourse surrounding the fan experience of wrestling is more akin to the discourse surrounding movies, television, or other forms of popular culture. This is evident in Internet forums such as Reddit.com's *SquaredCircle*, where wrestling fans analyze ad nauseum wrestling storylines and characters.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2018) defines sport as "an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment." Here, the competitive aspect is imperative for an activity to be sport. The Cambridge English Dictionary (2018),

on the other hand, gives two much broader definitions for sport: “a game, competition, or activity needing physical effort and skill that is played or done according to rules, for enjoyment and/or as a job” and “all types of physical activity that people do to keep healthy or for enjoyment.” The latter illustrates how the concept of sport leaves room for interpretation.

Even though professional wrestling simulates a competition environment through an exhibition of a fictional combat sport, it has no actual competitive aspect to it. Wrestlers are taught from very early on to not hurt one another (Mazer 1998, 82), and they compete against each other only in the sense that they all wish to further their careers. “Winning matches” is what usually keeps one relevant as this keeps the wrestler’s character strong. Also, when a performer “wins” a championship, it is often a legitimate mark of excellence bestowed upon the performer, even though he or she did not “win” the title in a competition. “Winning” often requires a cut-throat mentality behind the curtain as matches and storylines are conceived beforehand, but inside the ring, no such battle is fought.

Professional wrestling is an activity that requires immense physical effort and skill to be performed correctly. Unlike other sports of non-competitive nature which require physical effort (such as yoga or cross fit), professional wrestling is almost never done in order to improve one’s fitness. Furthermore, professional wrestling is an activity that most definitely worsens one’s physical wellbeing as injuries are extremely common and often severe.

This broad definition of sport being anything that requires physical effort becomes even more questionable when one imagines playing a large musical instrument such as a tuba or a double bass as sport. Both instruments require immense physical prowess to be played correctly, such as lung and finger strength, respectively. Also, almost all physical activity may be done for enjoyment, as the broad definition also states.

Therefore, the activity of professional wrestling is a sport only by an extremely loose definition of the term: it is not a competition and has very little

potential as a form of exercise; it does require physical exertion, but so do many other forms of human endeavor that are most certainly not considered sports. Granted, the audience of a professional wrestling show for all intents and purposes acts as if they were in a sporting event, but this is merely a convention of the genre. A convention that is ever-evolving.

As a televised form of entertainment, professional wrestling is categorized as sport.[5] For instance, Veijo Hietala (2003) does not differentiate the two at all and calls professional wrestling "the apex of post-modern media sports". For him, televised sport has evolved into something that encompasses the "fake sport" of professional wrestling. Hietala states that professional wrestling turns upside-down the fraudulent ideology of legitimate sports, the rules and the sportsmanship, that are continuously broken in the name of competition. For instance, this ideology is celebrated every four years with the Olympic Games that are in reality sodden with scandals of cheating and doping. In contrast to this, professional wrestling indeed turns cheating into a spectacle (Hietala 2003). Even though professional wrestling may be marketed as sport in its largest and most important medium, television, it is not regarded as sport by devout sports fans. It does not escape its "fakeness" by being "post-modern" as much as Veijo Hietala might claim. It is not embraced by people who crave the competitive aspect of sports, or those who live vicariously through their home town teams, or those who just need it to be "real" for it to make sense.

One can always take a Wittgensteinian approach to the definition of sport and say that professional wrestling has enough family resemblances with other sports that it can indeed be regarded as such. Ludvig Wittgenstein uses the definition of the word "game" as an example in his *Philosophical Investigations*. For him, all games do not share one quality that make them all games, but a series

[5] This is evident from channel listings. Professional wrestling is routinely broadcast on sports channels (like Sky Sports in the UK and until recently on Eurosport in Finland). This may be in part due to the growing number of specialized television channels, because wrestling is easier to sell to viewers associated with sports than with for instance films or news.

of family resemblances. (Wittgenstein 1999, 63–65.) By the same logic, professional wrestling could be defined as a sport, for it shares several family resemblances with other sports. Then again, is not the "fakeness" of professional wrestling such a discrepancy that it outdoes all of these family resemblances?

What is professional wrestling then, if not a sport? First and foremost, professional wrestling itself is a misleading and archaic term. It is a relic of a time when the product of professional wrestling and the fictional sport being simulated were one and the same. Today the secret is out. Yes, a professional wrestling match is what is being portrayed in the ring, but in all aspects, it is not what is happening in the real world as we have learned. In 1989, in order to evade state athletics commission fees for organizing sporting events, Vince McMahon coined the term "sports entertainment" and claimed WWF organized sports entertainment events and not sporting events (Hoy-Browne 2014). The term is somewhat hated by the average zealous wrestling fan as it is being used gratuitously in WWE's branding. Sports entertainment may be a fitting term for the genre of modern professional wrestling but its status as a branding word for the industry leader is such that in this study it will not be the preferred word. Also, in most English literature on the subject, the only term used is still "professional wrestling".

In her non-fiction book about boxing, the author Joyce Carol Oates states that she does not think of boxing as a sport. "Life *is* like boxing in many unsettling respects. But boxing is only like boxing." (Oates 1987, 4). One could say conversely: professional wrestling is not professional wrestling.

2.3 Wrestling as dance

When performing a professional wrestling match, two or more wrestlers are working together in order to tell a story with their bodies. They are creating a

situation where visibly it seems they are fighting, but in actuality they are performing wrestling maneuvers in tandem. Often the action is implausible to anyone who is accustomed to the realism of legitimate combat sports such as mixed martial arts. A fine example of this kind of implausible and unrealistic action is a maneuver called "the Irish whip", where a wrestler grabs the opponent's arm and whips him or her into a running motion. This is a frequently used yet simple way of creating distance between two performers inside the ring. In real life, no whipping or pushing motion is strong enough to force an opponent to actually run forward, but in the fictional universe where professional wrestling is set in, this is plausible. In professional wrestling there are also assisted lifts and throws in which the opponent jumps up to create the illusion of almost superhuman strength. In the past few decades, it has also become commonplace for wrestlers to perform acrobatic dives from the ring to the outside of the ring where the opponent must catch them quite blatantly and then fall down as if the dive had been a credible offensive maneuver. These maneuvers, implausible and unrealistic or not, are common in wrestling, and they are all more or less accepted within the average modern wrestling fan's willing suspension of disbelief.

For years Sharon Mazer watched from ringside as wrestling hopefuls honed their craft in a school in New York. She describes the learning process as something akin to dance rehearsals. The steps, forward rolls, backward falls, and lifts are repeated ad nauseam in order for them to be performed without thinking. According to Mazer, especially the early stages of a wrestler's training are extremely tedious as backward falls are repeated again and again. This is done to make a novice wrestler unafraid of falling on their back. The basics are learned so that they are imprinted in muscle memory as reflexes that can be called upon in any moment during training or during an actual match. (Mazer 1998, 72–73.) Any hesitation during a match can disrupt the timing and this is when dangerous accidents happen.

Dangerous accidents obviously are something one might want to force upon an opponent in a real fight, whereas in a choreographed professional wrestling match everything is more or less supposed to go as planned. When a blatant accident does happen, it is called a "botch". For instance, if a wrestler is accidentally dropped on his or her head instead of his or her back, it would be considered a "botched spot", as wrestlers are supposed to protect each other's heads. Botches can be scary to watch but also quite humorous at times, and there are several Internet communities that compile botched spots in videos (see e.g. Bochamania 2018). This practice speaks of the way modern wrestling fans have embraced the often overly choreographed, and at times predictable, dance-like performance aspect of wrestling as deviations from this are considered failures to perform correctly.

As modern wrestling fans get accustomed to glaringly choreographed sequences of maneuvers, older wrestling luminaries have criticized the fact that wrestling has gotten more and more unrealistic. On May 27th, 2016, the Japanese promotion New Japan Pro Wrestling presented a match between Will Osprey and Ricochet (see Dailymotion 2016). The men are known to be two of the most athletic and acrobatic wrestlers in the world. The match had several sequences of spectacular flips and dives with the men narrowly evading each other in extravagant fashion. At times the match devolved into almost a free form of dance between two friends in which they seemingly performed more of an exhibition of acrobatics than a pretend fight. Both men can also be heard discussing upcoming moves during the match, always a faux pas as wrestlers are supposed to allow the audience to suspend their disbelief. The Japanese live audience appreciated the match and it also became a viral phenomenon on the Internet. Legendary wrestling personality and promoter Jim Cornette, who is known for being a proponent of a form of wrestling that is first and foremost realistic, criticized the match on his podcast (Mitchell 2016):

> *Here's the thing. They're obviously great athletes, but it's not a wrestling match when you do s*** [sic] just to do it and not to simulate a real contest or struggle of any kind.*

Cornette also continued to express his dismay regarding the state of the wrestling business (Ibid.):

> *And it hurts my heart that we're so far gone people find this acceptable*.

Even though the Osprey/Ricochet match did follow the internal logic of a traditional professional wrestling match and eventually Osprey won the match, it is almost as if Osprey/Ricochet and other matches of this style have created a "wrestling avant-garde": a new style that disregards the former standards of willing suspension of disbelief and pushes the envelope to the point where it strikes a chord with the older generation. This is obviously a point in the evolution of any form of art or performance. Wrestling seems to be escaping the era of realism as the audiences are fully aware of the fact that wrestling is not real, and the fans are more and more accepting of highly implausible but exhilarating acrobatics. However, at this time few would argue that this new style has a place on the main event level of the grander stage of WWE.

It would be tempting to attempt a categorization of wrestling as a form of dance, as it is choreographed and often requires rehearsals and a high level of co-operation. The most obvious difference from dance comes from the fact that the storytelling in wrestling is less abstract than in forms of dance (more on this in 2.4). Also, the conventions of experiencing wrestling are closer to those in sporting events than in the world of dance. There is an obscure Finnish tradition from the early 20th century of "accordion wrestling" *(hanuripaini)* where legitimate bouts of Olympic style wrestling were accompanied by live accordion music. The music would be there for both entertainment purposes but also to camouflage the wrestlers' flatulence. In 2010, the tradition was reinvigorated as a part of the city of Turku's upcoming year as the cultural capital of Europe (See e.g. Yle 2010.) As a part of the festival, accordion wrestling was essentially exhibited as a curiosity, as a piece of modern dance that should be discussed as

dance. Accordion wrestling is not professional wrestling, but this setting would likely be the proper one if professional wrestling would be considered dance. This is not the case, however, and professional wrestling evades being categorized as dance even if both have several common qualities.

2.4 Wrestling as theater

Professional wrestling is first and foremost a form of storytelling. According to Eero Laine (2017, 39), the business of professional wrestling is the business of theater. In many respects WWE, as the industry leader, is an exemplary form of commercial theater which draws crowds in the tens of thousands all around the world. The following is a quote from WWE's first annual shareholders' report (Laine 2017, 45):

> *Live events are the cornerstone of our business and provide the content for our television and pay-per-view programming. Each event is a highly theatrical production, which involves a significant degree of audience participation and employs various special effects, including lighting, pyrotechnics, powerful entrance music, and a variety of props.*

WWE uses immense production values to create a live spectacle that tours year-round internationally (albeit mostly in the United States). The material filmed at some of the events is then used as television programming either live or on tape delay. This creates a product which can be consumed via television but also live in the building. In essence, the television product does not exist without the live experience provided to the fans, as the audience has a vital part to play in WWE programming. The audience members are paying customers but also background actors in a television show.

Televised WWE programming can be characterized as an episodic continuous melodrama where characters create rivalries and then settle these rivalries in the ring. The staging used by WWE is a mixture of that of traditional

theater and that of theater in the round. There are, in fact, two physical stages in every arena show that WWE produces: the entrance stage by one side of the building with lighting, pyrotechnics, and a video screen, from which the performers make their entry into the arena, and the actual elevated ring in the middle of the arena, where the matches take place. The stages are connected by a narrow downwards slanting ramp so, effectively, the two stages are level. This setting creates a platform where a performer can first make a verbal challenge and then seamlessly proceed to fighting in the ring, or as Claire Warden (2017, 17) puts it: "…wrestlers speak, put the microphone down, fight, win, pick the microphone back again." The verbal barring is often the most heavily scripted part of the performance, as it is what effectively drives the stories forward.

The staging is a key element in the delicate balance of speech and action. The distance between the stages is an invisible barrier that separates rivals so that neither will attack the other in the midst of a verbal argument. Animosities between the characters are often heated, and when two enemies occupy a shared space, it creates a situation where they logically should fight and not argue, and wrestlers do need to argue. Warden (2017, 17) points out the key difference between legitimate sports athletes and professional wrestlers: the best wrestlers are both "good workers" and "good on the mic", the former referring to the ability to wrestle and the latter to having the ability to tell stories through dialogue. Indeed, legitimate sports athletes are, at the end of the day, measured in their ability to win, not in their ability to entertain. However, true theatrical monologues or soliloquies do not occur often in professional wrestling, as the live audience is always reacting by cheering, booing, or down right heckling the performers. Theater does not allow its audience this freedom.

When a wrestler is acting hurt or injured, it is called "selling". One can (and should) for instance "sell the arm" if in the story of the match his or her opponent has delivered punishment to the said arm. More often than not the arm is not genuinely hurting. However, to wrestle is to feel real pain. Wrestlers crash into

each other and fall to the mat constantly during a match and the grimaces of pain etched on the performers' faces are at least partly genuine. Depending on the style of wrestling even uncomfortably so. Performance artist Marina Abramovic states in an interview with the Guardian in 2010 (Chow et al. 2017, 3):

> *To be a performance artist, you have to hate theater […] Theater is fake … The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.*

In this area, wrestling is definitely not theater. Until very recently[6], the act of "blading" was common place in wrestling. When a wrestler blades he or she discreetly makes a cut in their own forehead with a concealed piece of a razor blade (usually after a particularly violent strike to the head). The self-inflicted wound is very real as well as the blood that drizzles out and mixes with sweat to paint the wrestler's face in a crimson mask. (Chow et al. 2017, 2.)

It seems, then, that wrestling is somewhere between theater and performance. Wrestlers act, they "sell", and they deliver scripted dialogue on a stage to drive a story forward. However, to wrestle is not to act. Wrestling is a performance of genuine pain and sometimes even genuine bodily fluids.

2.5 Wrestling as a form of performance art

Attempts at defining anything from outside of the prevailing consensus as "art" are problematic for several reasons. Morris Weitz's view, derived from Wittgenstein, is that art is an open concept. According to him, there are no necessary conditions for something to be art and that claiming such conditions would hinder art's ability to be truly creative. On the other hand, according to George Dickie, Weitz does not take into consideration that "art" is often used not

[6] WWE especially has become very aware of blood-borne diseases and has completely stopped using the technique of blading.

as a classifying term but as an appreciative term. Classifying something as art is different from merely stating that something is art in an attempt to point out things that it has in common with art works. For instance, one may state that a piece of drift wood is art without actually making a claim that it should be taken into some vague sphere of "the arts". A piece of drift wood can be appreciated as art because of its art-like qualities without it actually being art. (Dickie 1990, 83–84.)

Dickie's institutional theory states that in order for something (an artefact) to be classified as art, an external procedure has to be performed upon it by an art institution, i.e. it has to be taken into a museum or a gallery or it has to be a product of an endeavor by an actor of sufficient status, i.e. an artist. (Dickie 1990, 86.) Dickie speaks of artefacts but the same goes for any artistic endeavor, be it films, theater, or dance. The institutional theory of art can be criticized in many different ways, but in effect it seems to be the prevailing consensus. Artists, regardless of their medium, make money and further their careers in museums, galleries, theaters, and movie theaters, in other words places of institutional status.

A spectator of a professional wrestling show may state that a wrestling match is art and use the word as an appreciative term. A wrestler can also claim that what he does is art in an attempt to point out that his performance has many art-like qualities.[7] Neither of these is a claim that professional wrestling is an institutionally accepted form of art. This claim is somewhat ludicrous since professional wrestling takes place in sports arenas, halls, school gyms, and stadiums. It is not out of the realm of possibilities for a wrestling match to take place in a museum as part of an exhibition. A professional wrestling match can

[7] For instance, Colt Cabana, an acclaimed freelance wrestler, has a weekly podcast called *The Art of Wrestling*. Also, Xavier Woods, a wrester of international fame, recently "defended" the art of wrestling on Twitter. <http://www.rollingstone.com/sports/news/wwes-xavier-woods-defends-the-art-of-pro-wrestling-20160422>

also be incorporated into a traditional theater play.[8] In these instances, the act of professional wrestling would become art in the classifying sense.

Professional wrestling undoubtedly operates outside the artworld. It does not seem to fit even the broadest definition of the word, as professional wrestling is often categorized as sport instead of, for instance, culture Professional wrestling news would be more at home in the sports section of the newspaper than in the culture section. Professional wrestling, however, is not considered a legitimate sport either, so it seems to fall in between two worlds. It is a form of performance which is thriving on its own outside further categorization. Perhaps this should be celebrated and perhaps arts analysis or even sports analysis should not be forced upon it.

[8] Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity is an American dramatic comedy play about a professional wrestler. The play included wrestling matches in a ring.

3. Fiction and professional wrestling

3.1 Introduction: make-believe and imagining with props

In this chapter I will examine the concepts of imagining, fictional truths, and fictional worlds insofar as they pertain to professional wrestling. I will argue that professional wrestling has a fairly uniform fictional world to itself. The fictional world is, however, tied to the conventions of non-fiction. Most interestingly it seems that the fictional world of professional wrestling encases a fictional audience as well. The American philosopher Kendall Walton (1990) expounds upon the subject of fiction in great detail in his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Further, Walton's special definition of the "representational arts" is that they are fiction (Walton 1990, 3).

Walton first explains his theories on make-believe and imagining with props. A simple game of make-believe is familiar to us all. A child proposes to another: "Let's say the floor is lava". The two agree and they commence to climb upon tables and chairs in order to avoid getting burned by the fictional lava. Thus, the floor is a prop that generates a fictional truth: that the furniture is standing on molten lava which will burn anyone who walks on it. Unbeknownst to the children, one of the children's parents is in the other room standing on the floor that, according to this fictional truth, is lava. Neither of the children imagine their parent standing on lava, but the floor generates the fictional truth that the parent is indeed standing on lava. Kendall Walton (1990, 38) calls this the "principle of generation". The children in the example established this principle explicitly by stating that the floor is lava, but not all principles are established this way.

Representations in art, such as Seurat's pointillist masterpiece *La Grande Jatte*, are props that are specifically made for the purpose of being used as such. The principles involving works of art are not established explicitly but are generally conventional and often even ineffable. We accept in the context of an

artwork that the paint blotches in *La Grande Jatte* constitute a couple standing on the beach. This is an implied fictional truth. In Walton's terms it is "*La Grande Jatte* -fictional" that there is a couple standing on the beach. (Ibid. 51, 38, 59.) It is not *La Grande Jatte* -fictional however, for example, that the woman in *La Grande Jatte* is pregnant. This would be an additional fictional truth that could be explicitly imagined, but it is not implied in the context of *La Grande Jatte*. In essence, this would be tantamount to creating another game of make-believe that is external from the fictional truths in *La Grande Jatte*. As a representation of the world, *La Grande Jatte* creates a fictional world, which encompasses truths that are not necessarily truths outside this particular fictional world.

Performances such as theater and films are also props specifically made for the purpose of being used in imagining fictional truths (ibid. 51). These truths are implied through conventions of the given genre. For instance, it is automatically implied that during a stage production of Hamlet, what happens on stage is a prop for imagining specific fictional truths, such as that Hamlet is the prince of Denmark. It is implied through the conventions of theater that Hamlet is fictional. If, for instance, a production of Hamlet broke out inside a rush hour train, it could be unclear for anyone not familiar with the play or who is not cued in to the performance by theatrical conventions that what is happening is a prop for imagining fictional truths. Thus, a stage production of Hamlet is a prop for imagining the fictional world of Hamlet, but an identical production of Hamlet, where the assumed audience is unaware that it is in fact a production of Hamlet, is not a prop for imagining fictional truths.

3.2 What are fictional entities and fictional worlds?

From fictional truths we shall proceed to examining fictional worlds. In J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan* (1904) there is a scene in which Peter turns to the audience

and asks them to clap their hands if they believe in fairies in order to save the dying Tinkerbell. This, according to Susanne Langer (1953, 319), is "disregard" of psychical distance and to seek audience participation in this way is to deny that drama is art. Whether this loss of distance is relevant in arguing if a play can be appreciated as an aesthetic object is up for debate, but it does raise an interesting dilemma about what can constitute a fictional world.

Fictional worlds encompass entities, such as characters, objects, and places, all of which are fictional. For instance, Wendy Darling, a character in Peter Pan, is a fictional 12-year-old girl whose adventures are truths inside the fictional world of Peter Pan but not outside of it.[9] Wendy lives in Bloomsbury, London which is a real place, but she resides in Darlings' house which is a fictional place. Thus, the city of London in Peter Pan is not the real city of London, but a fictional entity that has the name of a real city, but which assumes only some of its qualities. (Kroon & Voltolini 2016.)

Fictional worlds may also encompass fictional characters that share qualities with real world entities. For instance, in the film *Being John Malkovich* (1999), the actor John Malkovich plays a fictionalized version of himself, in that the actor shares several qualities with the character, most notably the name and the fact that both are actors. John Malkovich has also played several other characters in other films; characters that share many qualities with the actor, such as appearance and voice, but not the name nor the profession. In the case of *Being John Malkovich*, the audience is cued to assume several additional truths in the fictional world of the film because of the fact that John Malkovich plays an actor called John Malkovich. The audience may, for example, connect the character of John Malkovich with all the other films that the actor John Malkovich has appeared in or any publicized relationship that Malkovich has been in. Hence, the film is a

[9] It is possible to imagine a representational work of fiction, that is not Peter Pan, but which assumes all of the fictional truths of the play, but for the sake of argument, I shall in this case classify all of these as related works.

prop for imagining fictional truths, but the titular character has several qualities that are real world truths as well.

It is clear that a fictional entity is a special kind of entity. Let us first and foremost take the ontological stance that there are, in fact, such things as fictional entities that have the characteristics of not existing. A way to settle this paradoxical notion of there being entities that do not exist is to adopt a possibilist viewpoint, according to which fictional entities do not exist in the actual world but instead in some possible world. This view faces several problems, such as ontological indeterminacy, which states that there is more than one possible world in which a certain fictional entity can exist. (Kroon & Voltolini 2016) Walton (1990, 64) criticizes possibilism because, according to him, fictional worlds are often impossible (i.e. they contain impossible events which cannot happen in any possible world), and that fictional worlds are also incomplete. For instance, it would require additional imaginings to know who lives next to the Darlings' house in Peter Pan even though in a possible world someone logically should live there. Someone living next to the Darlings' house would be a quality that is not a truth in the fictional world of Peter Pan. All in all, it is not relevant to this thesis to examine further the possibility of fictional entities having ontological statuses.

Setting the scenes of Peter Pan in London or having John Malcovich play "himself" are instruments that are used to ease the burden of the author to create a specific stage for his or her fictional work. They also create a fictional world that the audience can more effortlessly imagine and identify with. These qualities that are inspired by real world counterparts do not make the fictional worlds less fictional or turn them into possible worlds.

So, what happened exactly in the case of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell? The audience was initially kept separate from the fictional world of the play, but then, all of a sudden, the clapping of the audience was a truth inside the fictional world even though the audience obviously is not a part of the fictional world of Peter Pan. As Tinkerbell is likely to wake up in all or most productions of the play, the

audience is subsequently once again relegated to the status of being an entity outside of the play. Wendy and Peter do not fly back to London from Neverland in front of a fictional crowd of people. Thus, the fictional world of Peter Pan does not encompass a fictional audience even though the play engages its audience for a brief moment.

3.3 Walton on non-fiction and myths

According to Walton (1990, 70), it is not the function of non-fiction to serve as a prop for make-believe. Non-fiction is therefore used to state real world truths instead of truths in some fictional world. Walton states that some non-fiction works that propose a theory, such as Darwin's *Origin of Species,* are designed to make the reader believe something and that believing something should theoretically require imagining fictional truths. However, *Origin of Species* in itself does not evoke beliefs. Rather, the arguments in it and the validity of these arguments evoke these beliefs by asserting claims of truth. (Walton 1990, 70.) It is of course possible for someone to read *Origin of Species* like a fictional work, thus making it a prop in a game of make-believe, but according to Walton (1990, 71), this does not make it a fictional work. This is because it is not its function. Conversely, if a work of non-fiction is found to be inaccurate, it does not make it a work of fiction. It should be noted that when Walton (1990, 70) talks about non-fiction, he mostly refers to literary non-fiction, but he seems to assert that his arguments apply to all things that are not fictional.

Walton (1990, 91) grants that he has left his notion of function deliberately vague and states that the functions of things are society-related and so is fiction. Most myths are fiction whose function has changed through time and Walton gives examples of legends and myths that arise from ancient or alien cultures and have the function of being fiction to us but have origins of being non-fiction. That

transformation from non-fiction to fiction tends to be gradual with phases of indeterminacy. Walton's ethnocentricity[10] aside, he makes a valid point that Western post-enlightenment culture has been preoccupied with truth and falsity in a way that many non-western cultures have not been. (Ibid. 95–96.) Walton raises the question of whether it is even relevant to care if things are true or false and suggests that maybe we could better glean insight and satisfaction from consuming fictional worlds if we did not put too much bearing on their falsehood.

It becomes clear that the difference between fiction and non-fiction is mostly dependent on conventions of language. Non-fiction is found on shelves marked "non-fiction", whether they are true or false, because they assert claims of truth. Autobiographies are non-fiction even though they might embellish reality to a ridiculous degree, and novels are fiction however truthful they may be. Perhaps one should not put too much pertinence on this divide. Perhaps one should not attempt to provide sufficient and necessary conditions to fiction or non-fiction and just consider both as being akin to genres. This is not to claim that it is irrelevant whether things are true or false, because it is, but Walton (1990, 101) suggests that maybe what to us counts as "reality" is often merely the "authorized story".

3.4 The fictional world of professional wrestling

As I have stated earlier, the genre of entertainment called "professional wrestling" portrays the fictional sport called professional wrestling. Therefore, the sport of professional wrestling happens exclusively inside a fictional world. This fictional world is, in fact, remarkably uniform and most professional wrestling companies do not present fictional worlds that are separate from the worlds presented in

[10] Walton does not refer to any western religious mythology that could be currently regarded as non-fiction at least by some audiences.

other professional wrestling companies. Other companies are naturally competition, so they rarely are publicized within the product, but when, for instance, a more renowned performer becomes available to be employed by a wrestling company, his or her character's accomplishments outside of said company are often mentioned, thus making them universal truths inside the fictional world of wrestling. This happened repeatedly during the Monday night wars era described in chapter 1, when wrestlers jumped from WWF to WCW and vice versa[11], in essence making the two companies share a fictional world.

WWE is both the name of the entertainment company that puts on a show and the name of the fictional "fighting league" operating inside the fictional world of the said show. Inside the world of professional wrestling matches are legitimate competitions and the characters portrayed are actual people. WWE then is a fictional entity that shares the name of a real-world entity much like the city of London in Peter Pan shares the name with the actual city of London. WWE's name is a vestige of the time when professional wrestling was presented as a legitimate sport and when the illusory nature of the business was still protected, but it would not be presently unfathomable if the two entities had different names. However, to this day it is customary that wrestling companies have names that sound like legitimate sports leagues and that are often abbreviated. Currently though, in the professional wrestling lexicon and also in the discourse surrounding professional wrestling the fictional WWE and the non-fiction WWE are associated with each other.

Professional wrestlers portray characters, but they are not commensurate to actors in films. For the most part, wrestlers only play one character for the duration of their careers and often adopt that character in all public relations. For instance, Joseph Anoa'i portrays the fictional character of Roman Reigns but the person is always referred to as Roman Reigns and not Joseph Anoa'i. One could compare this to a musician having a stage name, but a musician is not performing

[11] Character's names were however often tweaked because of copyright issues.

as a part of a fictional world. Currently in WWE, it is the norm that performers are given stage names, so the company could claim the copyrights. This is not always the case, however. For instance, in 1999 WWE hired Olympic gold medalist in freestyle wrestling, Kurt Angle, who would subsequently only perform under his real name. WWE obviously wanted to capitalize on his fame and credibility as an athlete. This created a situation somewhat similar to the one in *Being John Malkovich*, as Angle would portray himself in the fictional world of professional wrestling. Ultimately, whether a wrestler performs under a stage name or not is somewhat irrelevant because professional wrestlers are associated with their characters in a way that actors usually are not. Ultimately, the fact that Kurt Angle portrays Kurt Angle is merely an instrument that cues the audience to associate Angle's character with the accolades of Angle the Olympic athlete.

In the fictional sport of professional wrestling the wrestlers fight for money, revenge, glory, respect, and most importantly championships. Championships in professional wrestling are, of course, not won in legitimate sporting contests but are used as fictional story engines. A championship is thus given to the character who is focused on and is currently being portrayed as a winner. The performer who holds a championship title[12] is in a prominent role, often meaning that portraying a fictional champion generally corresponds to more money, prestige, and respect among peers. When, for instance, Roman Reigns' character wins a championship title**,** the character is a champion inside a fictional world, but the performer also holds the accolade of "being" a champion rather than just "portraying" a champion. The audience is cued to recognize the championship not only as a fictional accolade but as an actual real-world reward given to the performer. This mentality seeps into the fictional world where the

[12] A championship is traditionally symbolized by an oversized leather belt with ornamental metal plates that the champion performer carries to the ring as a trophy. Often it is the performer's responsibility to tend to the belt and not lose it between shows and historically it was not uncommon that a new champion had to pay a collateral to the promoter, the owner of the belt. The collateral also secured that the performer would not take the championship and the prestige that it symbolized into a rival promotion.

audience members legitimately want their favorite performers to portray winners, effectively making the championship a non-fiction entity inside a fictional world.

All the aforementioned aspects of the fictional world of professional wrestling are conventions of the genre that has its roots in legitimate sport as we have learned in chapter 1. For instance, wrestling television programs do not have opening or closing credits like other fictional programming during which the wrestlers' or writers' names could be revealed. Credits sequences would in a way create a psychical distance between the audience and the fictional world, a distance which according to Langer (1953, 319) is imperative for drama to be art. It is not the convention to create such distance in wrestling. Professional wrestling is also staged and filmed very much like a sports program: it features instant replays of the more spectacular moments, sports commentary as story narration, and other aspects of sports production. This cues the audience to regard it as sport even though the audience is well aware of the fact that it is not a legitimate one. The conventions of the genre, or rather the lack of traditional conventions of fiction, create a confusing reality where a new spectator can find it difficult to relate to professional wrestling. It appears too fictional to be a sport and too much like a sport to be fiction. Be that as it may, wrestling has its audience that seems to embrace these conventions.

3.5 Professional wrestling as myth

Walton (1990, 95) notes that myths tend to be in a transformation from non-fiction status to fictional status and that this transformation can be gradual with stages of indeterminacy. Many aspects about professional wrestling's legitimacy were, for an extensive period of time, myths that were protected from within the industry (see 1.1). Roland Barthes writes about the French wrestling culture of

the 1950's in his collection of essays *Mythologies*. Barthes (2005, 23) described wrestling as a modern myth:

> *The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees*.

The wrestling of Barthes' era was in the early phases of the transformation from non-fiction to fiction and it was truly a myth in that sense. Barthes does not fixate on whether the wrestling matches of his day were predetermined contests because it is not relevant to him. He merely says that, for instance, betting on a wrestling contest would not make sense, for it is not a cohesive story but instead a series of moments (Ibid., 24).

Currently however, professional wrestling straddles the line between fiction and non-fiction purposely. First, it hides its fictional status in sport and reality television-based conventions in order to allow the audience to hold a willing suspension of disbelief. Then again, professional wrestling has embraced its fictionality and (namely) WWE has begun to produce documentary-style programming that features the behind-the-scenes aspect of the business in a way that would have been unthinkable just a few decades ago. Often this documentary programming is featured or advertised within the traditional wrestling product to the extent that it creates a somewhat confusing condition. One could describe modern professional wrestling as being in a stage of indeterminacy. It is in a way mythology in a gradual process of transformation from being non-fiction to being pure fiction.

Another example of WWE embracing the conventions of fiction has developed recently as WWE has started to insert some elements of cinematic production into the traditional wrestling product. On April 30th, 2017, WWE held its annual Payback event in the SAP Center in San Jose, California (WWE 2017). The show featured a match between Bray Wyatt and Randy Orton, billed as the House of Horrors match. The match began in a remote house, not at the arena, and

featured special lighting effects and ominous background music, all elements that are unconventional in professional wrestling. The sports commentary stopped for the duration of the match and there were no instant replays. Effectively, the match abandoned most, if not all, of the conventions of professional wrestling. The segment resembled a fight scene out of a horror movie and induced wrestling podcast personality Jared St. Laurent (2017) to give the following review (transcribed from a podcast by the author):

> *That is the kind of match that makes me not want to be in the business. If that is what pro wrestling is, I don't want to be in it. You know, a low budget movie, a stunt-show in a house. That's not pro wrestling. Nobody can watch that and think that was real, and people can say whatever they want about the business being exposed. The business draws money when you get people to not think about it being fake, and you can't not think about it being fake when you're watching that.*

St. Laurent expresses the give-and-take of willing suspension of disbelief between the author and the audience. The audience is well aware of the fact that they are witnessing a work of fiction, but they do not want to be reminded of that. The documentaries that purposely break the fourth wall and the recent cinematic elements are all reminders of fictionality in a genre that once celebrated its non-fictionality. This pivots professional wrestling away from its myth-like status described by Barthes.

Putting its recent developments aside, in its core professional wrestling is fiction, which appears as if it was non-fiction. In the current enlightened environment – where, as Walton points out, it is critical that one believes only facts about the real world and not myths – professional wrestling does not seem to have cultural value. The question is whether it is against professional wrestling's nature to be one or the other, fiction or non-fiction. As Walton intimates, it might serve us well as an audience not to put too much bearing on which it is. Be that as it may, mainstream professional wrestling is actively distancing itself from non-fiction and veering into the realm of fiction. We cannot

take myths seriously in our age, and professional wrestling wants to be taken seriously.

3.6 The fictional audience of professional wrestling

We have learned in chapter 1 that professional wrestling has its roots in legitimate sports. However, if modern professional wrestling is indeed only a sport in a fictional world, it comes to reason that it has a fictional audience as well. Admittedly, it would make very little logical sense for a fictional professional wrestler to wrestle in front of a crowd that is under the assumption that his fights are predetermined, choreographed, and fake. Thus, the professional wrestling audience must be a fictional truth as well as an entity in the real world. These two audiences are, of course, the same audience. Essentially, it follows that a single audience member at a live wrestling show is simultaneously spectating a fictional performance and a part of said performance. The audience, in essence, is performing whether they want to or not. In other words, professional wrestling is a form of performance which has historically and organically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents to them.

This performative aspect of the audience's experience has grown as a product of the age of television. As described earlier, WWE produces live events that are then filmed and distributed as television content. From the point of view of the television audience, the live crowd is an element of the show. It comes to reason that most, if not all, audience members are aware that they are an element of the show. This creates a unique situation where the professional wrestling audience is participating inside a fictional world and thus, in Waltonian terms, inside a representational work of art. This would theoretically make professional wrestling a participatory art. The scope of the participatory nature of the professional wrestling audience is discussed deeply in chapter 5, but firstly it is

important to discuss the theories of the special subspecies of art called participatory art.

4. Art and participation

4.1 Introduction: the motives of participation and the discourse surrounding it

I concluded the last chapter with the idea that the professional wrestling audience is particularly participatory in the live product it consumes. This is somewhat contradictory to the notion that professional wrestling is a spectacle as a spectacle is usually considered to have a passivating effect on its audience. The relationship of spectacle and participation is examined by the British art historian, critic, and author Claire Bishop. In the following chapters I will utilize her theories and further the theories of French philosopher Jacques Rancière in order to eventually examine the tumultuous marriage between professional wrestling and its audience. In her book *Artificial Hells,* Bishop explores the participatory trends in contemporary art. Her definition of participation in art is such where "people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theater and performance" (Bishop 2012, 2).

The theoretical framework and basic political motives behind participatory art are in the critique of capitalism and its alienating and divisive effects on the public. These critiques claim that capitalism demands apathetic consumers and aims to halt social change. Guy Debord articulates this rationale in his *The Society of the Spectacle*, in which he states that the market is completely saturated with art and imagery that constitute the spectacle that is consumed by passive spectators. This spectacle demands our attention in a way that estranges us from each other and hinders authentic relations. To battle this, art must become participatory so it can repair the social bonds it has helped to sever. (Bishop 2012, 11.) So, it seems that spectacle is the main culprit and the theoretical counterpart to participation as spectacle requires its audience to be uninvolved and inactive as opposed to one that engages itself in true social change. As consumers we are required to be mere background actors in spectacles

out of our control and this is the dynamic that participatory art aims to mend. It should be stressed that, for Debord, spectacle is not merely a characteristic of the visual arts, but it is a definition of the social relations that hold sway under capitalism (Bishop 2011, 1). The arts seem to be just as ailing as any institution that gets its cues from the society at large.

Another persistent motive of participatory art is the quest to make art a part of the communal life as opposed to it being a part of the artworld, as the artworld is generally dominated by individuals, the artists. This also stems from the general anti-capitalist and anti-market ideology that defines participatory art. Artworks by individual artists made in the confines of the artworld are considered products sold to individual consumers. As artists begin to oppose this dynamic, it often leads to unmonetizable "situations" that are not commodities as such, but direct ways to induce social collaboration. Bishop suggests (2012, 13) that this is the avant-garde of today: the drive to fuse art with life. As Dan Graham puts it: "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art" (Ibid., 1).

However, the complete amalgamation of art and life would result in a new order where there would be no art at all. It is no wonder, then, that many participatory art projects are met with confusion over the way they are supposed to be received as works of art. As many collaborative works purely strive to be collaborative and "more life than art", their artistic merits tend to be measured only by the terms of how they achieve these goals. This pulls participatory art out of the realm of aesthetics. Bishop calls this "the ethical turn" (Ibid., 18). When the aesthetic merits of participatory works are difficult to assess, it is often easiest to resort to ethical criteria. Bishop gives the Finnish-American artist Liisa Roberts' work *What's the Time in Vyborg?* (2000–) as an example. The art project comprises of several long-term workshops, exhibitions, performances, films and events, all taking place around the Vyborg city library. The critic Reinaldo Laddaga noted about *What's the Time in Vyborg?* that any critical evaluation of it should be

simultaneously aesthetic and ethical. (Ibid., 18–19.) In other words, *What's the Time in Vyborg?* has a tangible and concrete impact in repairing the community and this impact should be considered as a merit of the art itself.

Bishop does not expound upon why Roberts' work is being assessed at all by an art critic in Laddaga or why it is even labeled as a single work of art. *What's the Time in Vyborg?* seems to merely be a series of social projects in the vein of anything organized by almost any public library in any European country. These other social projects are obviously not being discussed as artworks. Bishop (Ibid., 18) says that it is often difficult to discuss participatory art projects in the conventional framework of art criticism, but she fails to explain why it is even necessary. Maybe the artistic discourse is a necessity so that these projects remain in the sphere of the arts. As Bishop (2012, 19) notes: "The aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with comparable projects in the social domain."

With the ethical comes the political, and Claire Bishop (2012, 3) recounts how in recent years in several European countries the idea of socially engaging collaborative arts has been appropriated by different political regimes. For instance, New Labour in the UK (1997–2010), in an effort to advocate for spending in the arts, asked the question of what the arts can do for society. The answer was the prevention of "social exclusion". This led to national art projects that were socially inclusive. Participation became the preferred way and more or less the ultimate end game of all arts. This policy was heavily criticized, as social exclusion is more of a symptom of a problem than a problem in itself, with the ultimate problem being social inequality. (Bishop 2012, 13.) Essentially, the idea of participation was harnessed to conceal actual social injustices and to eventually make disruptive individuals conform to the ideals of consumerism. According to Bishop (2012, 14) this goes against everything participatory art was supposed to stand for. For her, being anti-establishment is in the core of pure participatory art and it should never be used to further the cause of the establishment.

What should be apparent is the political and ethical nature of all participatory art as the motives for it seem to always be such. Participatory art projects evade pure aesthetic judgment because they always seem to have a grander societal motive, not just in their meaning but also in the simple fact that they are participatory. They are not to be experienced in a state of disinterestedness.

4.2 The Battle of Orgreave (Jeremy Deller, 2001)

An example of a particularly successful piece of recent participatory art is *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) by British artist Jeremy Deller. It is successful in that it manages to be communal, political, and unmonetizable. The piece was essentially a performance re-enactment of a violent brawl between around 5000 picketing miners and 8000 riot policemen that took place in northern England in 1984. The fight was a defining event in the 1984–1985 miners' strike brought about by the free trade politics of Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Deller's piece brought together former miners, locals, and several historical battle re-enactment societies. The participants rehearsed and then acted out the events of the fight on the site of the actual battle in the village of Orgreave. The event was viewed from the periphery by the public and footage of it was also used in a feature-length political documentary by Mike Figgis. It was also documented for an installation and for archival purposes for Tate modern. The piece garnered much attention from the national media and raised awareness about a rather messy incident in Britain's recent history. (Bishop 2012, 30–32.)

According to Bishop (2012, 32), for the former miners who took part in the piece, the event was therapeutic albeit their performance came from a place of bitterness. The historical battle re-enactors, who were mostly middle-class neutral outsiders from the original battle, found in the piece a way to fraternize

with the working class. Being a part of *The Battle of Orgreave* offered a kind of historic re-education to the re-enactors. During the event the village of Orgreave turned into a fairground with outsiders coming in to watch the performance, with bands playing, and with pies being sold. (Ibid., 32–33.) It is safe to say that the production and the performance of the piece brought the community together and into a national spotlight in a very palpable way.

Deller worked closely in collaboration with the former miners as well as the battle re-enactors. The piece was organized and rehearsed with the artist, but just moments before the actual performance Deller is interviewed for Figgis' documentary, and he claims that he has no control over what happens next. According to Deller, the event would be chaos. (Ibid., 32.) Essentially, the piece created by Deller takes a life of its own in that the participants are a part of the piece and Deller has no power over the participants. According to Bishop (2012, 32), the uneasiness of the situation supervened by the fairground atmosphere of the village created a confused experience for the public watching. For the people taking part, the piece was obviously far from a mere spectacle, but Bishop fails to expound further upon the experience of the spectator watching the event from the outside. It would be safe to assume that their experience was something related to watching the spectacle of a violent sporting event.

According to Bishop (2012, 36), *The Battle of Orgreave* is almost universally considered an exemplary work of participatory art not just because it is communal but because it is unequivocally political. More accurately, it is a new expression of leftist politics in art (Ibid, 36). Whereas socialist realism of the mid-20th century portrayed the worker as a heroic ideal, Deller shows that the working class can be a violent, imperfect, yet oppressed group. This could not be as accurately expressed without utilizing actual oppressed people.

Even though Deller worked in collaboration with the participants of the work and may have eventually even lost control of them, he remains the authorial figure of *The Battle of Orgreave*. The piece may appear as if it has all the properties

of a historic battle re-enactment albeit of a non-traditional one, but it is in fact a work of art. The mere fact that the piece is considered a single work of art by a single artist means that it fails to amalgamate itself with life in the way that is suggested to be the endgame of participatory art. This is certainly not a fair criticism of any artwork, but it raises the question that perhaps something outside of art can have the potential to get closer to achieving the utopian goals of participatory art. Perhaps the artwork-spectator relationship needs to be further disassembled in order to shake the public awake from the lethargy caused by the spectacle.

4.3 Jacques Rancière, the unpredictable subject, and "new theater"

Debord's idea of the seducing image being poisonous is nothing new. Plato criticized images for taking us even further from truths (Plato 2009, 29). The French philosopher Jacques Rancière takes Debord's criticisms of the spectacle even further. For him, being a spectator is inherently a bad thing. First, viewing for Rancière is the opposite of knowing, as the spectator is held in a place of ignorance from the production of the image. Secondly, viewing is the opposite of acting as the spectator remains passive. The viewer is therefore robbed of both the capacity to know and the power to act. (Rancière 2011, 2.) This can also be taken as a critique of the Kantian experience of beauty in art as Kant held disinterestedness as the necessary condition of a pure judgement of beauty. For Kant, this experience is not based on knowledge of concepts, but merely on completely detached pleasure. (Kant 2009, 333.) For Kant, there is no knowledge or action in the experience of beauty. For Rancière, then, an aesthetic system that glorifies the contemplation of beauty in images is evil, as it prohibits the kinds of knowledge and action that lead to the formation of a true community (Ibid., 2–3). In other words, the more man contemplates the less he lives (Ibid., 6). It is

important to note that Rancière talks about theater, but explicitly states (2011, 2) that that term includes all forms of spectacle, be it drama, dance, or performance art. Bishop (2012, 38) also further interprets Rancière to mean all kinds of art.

For Rancière, a piece of art in itself is an intermediary object or a "third term" to which both the artist and the viewer can relate (Bishop 2012, 38). In the case of participatory art, the third term is merged with the viewer so the relationship between the artist and the audience is ideally more direct. However, even in this dynamic the artist merely hands the viewer a finite amount of power. Deller gave the participants of *The Battle of Orgreave* some power in the confines of his artwork. Rancière notes that in a system that we would call a democracy a participant is simply filling up spaces left empty by power, whereas true participation, whatever it may be, is the invention of an "unpredictable subject" (Bishop 2011, 9). This suggests the realization of a utopian radical who is able to momentarily occupy spaces in the established system in which the radical is not necessarily welcomed.

When it comes to spaces for participation left open by power, Bishop references (2011, 7) a classic diagram called "The Ladder of Participation" from an article by Sherry Arnstein in 1969. The ladder depicts different amounts of attention paid by those in power to the everyday voice. The ladder has eight rungs, but it is divided into three main stages: nonparticipation, tokenism, and citizen power (Arnstein, 1969). The top rung is the ultimate goal: citizen control. According to Bishop (2011, 7), the diagram is a useful tool for thinking about the claims of participation by those in power. This is also true for works of art. The bottom part represents traditional non-participatory art where the viewer is left with the role of the passive spectator. It is telling that the middle part of the ladder is called "tokenism". Participation in this stage is a mere indication of citizen power. This amount of participation has nominal value as it only symbolizes something of true value. It can be argued that this is where participatory art is located on the ladder. Participatory art only symbolizes the unpredictability of a

subject idealized by Rancière. This is not to say that giving the participants of an artwork even a taste of genuine power is somehow bad. It is, after all, further up the ladder than pure spectatorship. Nevertheless, it is not the real thing nor the ultimate goal.

As has been stated, Rancière believes (2011, 2–3) that theater is inherently evil as it prohibits knowledge and action. Theater is the third term standing in between the artist and the viewer blocking the formation of a true community, a community of active power. This community is one that does not tolerate theatrical mediation. However, for Rancière, theater is an exemplary form of community. It encapsulates the ideal of a living community that occupies the same place and time as opposed to forms that utilize the distance of representation. (Rancière 2011, 5–6.) Rancière states (2011, 4) that what is needed, then, is a "new theater"; a theater in which those in attendance are able to glean knowledge as opposed to being merely exposed to images, but also a theater in which those in attendance are able to act as opposed to being passive voyeurs. This would essentially be a theater without spectators but with a knowing, acting community audience. The new theater would be the ultimate realm of the unpredictable subject.

Nevertheless, there is still the third term, the piece of art. Rancière grants that present-day artists do not wish to only expose their audience to images, but they wish to provide a consciousness, a feeling, or an energy of action. However, the artists always presuppose a certain cause and effect. They assume that what is being felt or acted upon is the thing they have put out there. (Rancière 2011, 14). This is the very essence of the artist-audience dynamic of the art world that also haunts participatory art and what stands in between it and its utopian goals. There is no room for the unpredictable subject in this dynamic. The ideal of the Rancièrian new theater is therefore not found in the realm of participatory art. It can be argued that the art world has its limits whereas genuine participation can have no limits.

5. Professional wrestling and participation

5.1 Introduction: traditional modes of audience participation in wrestling

Gary Hart was a prolific evil manager of several wrestlers in the Houston area in the 1980's. The devilish Hart would often interfere in matches in order to nefariously help the wrestlers he was managing. Over time this caught the ire of the powers that be in the Texas promotion. After Hart was eventually banned from ringside during the matches of one of his clients, The Spoiler, who was a monstrous giant with more brawn than brains, Hart was interviewed and asked whether The Spoiler would be able to win without Hart's constant guidance. Hart proclaimed that The Spoiler would do fine because even though Hart was banned from ringside, he could always buy a ticket to the show and perhaps even find a way to communicate with The Spoiler from the stands, from among the fans. Hart hinted that he could perhaps use a flashlight. The next time The Spoiler wrestled, Hart was indeed nowhere to be found. When the match started, however, all over the arena numerous flashlights began to light up and point at the ring. The fans had brought them along to confuse The Spoiler and to ruin the plans of the evil Gary Hart. Bewildered, The Spoiler began to cry toward different sections of the audience: "Gary is that you?" Hart, however, was not there. He was performing at a different show in another part of the country. (Prichard 2017.)

We learned in chapter 3 that the live audience of a professional wrestling show is an integral part of the fictional world of professional wrestling. When fans buy a ticket to a televised WWE show, they know that in addition to witnessing a show, they get to be a part of it. As WWE wants its television product to be as exciting as possible, the audience is encouraged to perform, to make noise, and to convey a sense of frenzy to the audience at home. Whereas in the past wrestling television programs aimed to sell the television audience on the live product, today WWE has been able to monetize the television audience directly: the live,

physically present audience is an element of production rather than its means (Ezell 2017, 11). Essentially, the paying customer has a job as a background actor, and in a way, WWE has a history of exploiting its paying audience in order to make good television. Televised professional wrestling indeed demands an active audience. It is not uncommon, then, that when a new professional wrestling company is starting to put out a televised product, it would hold complimentary shows to ensure a full live audience. For instance, this was the business model for the Florida-based upstart promotion TNA Wrestling for years (Impact Wrestling 2016).

The traditional dynamic of audience participation in professional wrestling is such in which the hero (in wrestling parlance "the babyface" or "the face") is cheered and the villain (in wrestling parlance "the heel") is booed. The audience, to this day, more often than not performs in a way that conveys the sense that the face has an implied home field advantage. This is the standard circumstance in the fictional world of professional wrestling, as it fits the central story of the hero overcoming the odds in front of a supportive audience. It is also a cathartic experience to members of the audience when they feel as if they have helped the morally upstanding face in defeating the villainous heel.

The live audience reactions create a vital aural backdrop for the televised matches. As the audience more often than not acts in a rather predictable way, in which the wrestlers portraying faces are cheered and the wrestlers portraying heels are booed, it creates an unambiguous television product as well. However, whether an audience follows this exact dynamic or not, it is always obliged to at least make noise. As any wrestling promoter would say, there is nothing worse than a silent audience. This is true to the point that WWE has even taken up the practice of adding audio of audience reactions to taped shows in order to convey the desired atmosphere in the building (Sapp 2015). Additionally, the live audience's contribution to the television product is evident in the way the

professional wrestling fan base even tends to critique live crowds as if they were a separate production element (see e.g. Soucek 2013).

In addition to its voice being used, the enthusiastic crowd is abundantly shown on camera. Since the audience is, essentially, performing for the camera, in the last few decades a practice of fans bringing cardboard signs to televised shows has emerged in the WWE. The signs often have supportive messages for the performers but also inside jokes and comments directed to the audience watching at home. At times, the signs can be inappropriate or even advertisements for other wrestling companies, and WWE has on multiple occasions confiscated signs from sections of the crowd that are shown more often on camera. A more interesting trend concerns WWE's recent effort to confiscate signs that support wrestlers who are not heavily featured, or signs that are against certain wrestlers who are featured as faces (Murray 2016). This, with the practice of boosting the crowd audio, has to be seen as an effort to manipulate the part of the fictional world of WWE that the audience itself creates (see e.g. Varble 2017).

5.2 Chants: the shared voice of a community

In addition to the cheers and boos of the audience, the aural backdrop, the audience of a wrestling show often engages in collective rhythmic chants to either support or hinder a specific performer. Again, the audience often rallies behind the face as if the face had a home field advantage in a sporting event. This fits the central story of professional wrestling in which the hero requires the support of the people in order to overcome the odds and become victorious. The chants can range from a simple repetition of the performer's name to even quite complex fraises.[13] Chanting is naturally a direct appropriation of team sports culture,

[13] For instance, WWE wrestler Samoa Joe has garnered chants ranging from just repetition of "Joe!" to "Let's go Joe!" The audience even once in a while serenades Samoa Joe's opponents with: "Joe is gonna kill you!"

although in professional wrestling, as we have learned, the audience is performing in a more evident way.

Not all chants are in accordance with the central story of professional wrestling. Often the audiences engage in what one could call "radical chants" during which the audiences disregard the story being told to them and start to criticize the performance in itself or the story being told. For instance, it is not uncommon for a live audience to unify to chant "Boring!" at the performers if the action displeases them. Sharon Mazer recounts (1998, 49) such instance as if it was a completely natural part of the dialogue between the audience and the performers. According to her, the disappointed "Boring!" chants bring an immediate response from the ring, as the performers commence to speed up the action. Granted, this is true in the traditional sense. When professional wrestling is performed in front of a small crowd and when the in-ring action is more or less improvised, the performers have the ability and freedom to interact with the audience in this manner and engage in an ebb and flow of action dictated in part by the audience. To quote prominent independent wrestler Colt Cabana (Ezell 2017, 12):

> *It's not the audience's job to enjoy my wrestling, it's my job to listen to how they're responding and change what I'm doing accordingly.*

This is not true thought when it comes to WWE television in 2018 as the product can be pedantically scripted. The performers are often required to go through the motions in a strict time frame and are not given the freedom to interact with the crowd as much. Mazer presents an almost ideal intimate situation in which the performers engage in a free form of professional wrestling, but this is not the case in WWE. When WWE performers hear chants of "Boring!" during their match, they tend to regard the crowd as disrespectful to them and their efforts in the ring (see e.g. Middleton 2017).

Another new trend in audience participation in professional wrestling are the dueling chants, during which the audience's opinion on a wrestler is seemingly

split. The most famous example of this is the reaction that one of WWE's most prolific performers, John Cena, typically receives. Often, one segment of the live audience, usually women and children, engages in chanting "Let's go Cena!" to which another segment, often the dominant adult male audience, replies "Cena sucks!" As John Cena has been solely portraying a face since 2004, this rhythmic dialogical chant was first seen as quite problematic by the WWE production team. It showed that Cena was perhaps not quite as popular as the main protagonist of the company should be. At Wrestlemania 22 in 2006 in Chicago, the biggest WWE show of the calendar year, WWE anticipated the aforementioned mixed reaction and had their announcers explain to the television viewer before the match that the live audience might not be completely behind John Cena. Jim Ross, WWE's lead announcer at the time, explained that the Chicago crowd is quite traditional and that a portion of the crowd would possibly not back Cena because of his unorthodox street-fighting style and hip-hop swagger (WWE 2006). In reality, the reaction of the Chicago crowd toward Cena was merely a natural progression of the audience getting somewhat tired of seeing the same performer portraying the dominant character. Thus, Jim Ross assigned a new truth into the fictional world of WWE in order to justify the audience's reaction, which would be contradictory to the primary story of the match in which Cena was the hero. In the last decade, however, the dueling chants of "Let's go Cena!"/"Cena sucks!" have become commonplace and WWE as well as Cena himself have learned to embrace them. In 2011, WWE went as far as to license a "Cena sucks!" t-shirt as part of its official merchandise line as a tribute to the popular chant (Mrosko 2011).

All of the trends in audience chants discussed above have been characteristics of the crowds in North America. There are, in fact, significant cultural differences between crowds in different countries. For instance, the Japanese crowds are traditionally very quiet and composed in comparison to the raucous American crowds (Dilbert 2013). The British crowds, in contrast, are very active and they have appropriated a lot of the audience culture of soccer to their

participatory habits. For instance, British sports fans engage in sing-a-longs, an activity which is somewhat alien to Americans. When WWE held its NXT Takeover show in London in 2015, the live audience at times took over the program completely, singing popular pop tunes with lyrics dedicated to the performers. To some viewers in America, this took away from the stories being told in the ring as the audience seemed to be merely entertaining itself. During a match between a popular face, Bayley, and a much larger heel, Nia Jax, as Bayley was in a severe predicament, the audience just kept singing to Bayley in a cheerful and almost indifferent manner. In his review of the match, wrestling writer Dave Meltzer said the following:

> *During the first part of the match, the crowd was more into serenading (sic) Bayley with songs ("Hey Baby" (sic), "Bayley's Gonna Hug You") and wasn't really paying attention to the flow of the match. The match itself was mostly Jax using power moves and the crowd not taking it seriously.* (Pollard 2015)

WWE is an international entertainment company and British fans are some of its most loyal customers. However, to some television viewers there are expectations of how the live audience should interact with the product. Meltzer's opinion echoes the frustration of a viewer that expects the live audience to act in a way that complements the story of the match. The British fans made an implicit effort to take over the show and make it about them instead of the matches. This might have been a demonstration of an egocentric mode of participation, but it is evidence of the fact that the wrestling crowd holds real power.

It takes a community to initiate an audible chant. From the smallest of gymnasiums to the largest of stadiums, chants are not merely a way for the audience to amuse itself or a means to bolster some collective ego. Chants are a shared vehicle of power to the wrestling audience. They are a tangible element that differentiates wrestling from the different forms of theater that leave their audiences passive.

5.3 Smart crowds: insider knowledge and modes of participation

As with any form of culture, knowledge about the inner workings of professional wrestling constitutes a kind of cultural capital inside the sphere of wrestling fandom. When industry rumors such as wrestlers' contract negotiations, injuries, or personal disputes leak to outsiders, it becomes a point of pride for the zealous wrestling fan to be aware of them. It should be iterated that professional wrestling, and WWE in particular, attracts both casual television viewers as well as so-called "smart fans" to whom insider knowledge is an integral part of the fan experience. Professional wrestling's mendacious past emphasizes the importance of a true fan knowing as much as possible of what is happening behind the curtain. Surely, a smart fan does not get fooled. The advent of the Internet brought insider knowledge of the business into the mainstream, and currently a large portion of the WWE fanbase are super fans who follow industry gossip very closely. This often influences how the fans participate, thus influencing the live product itself. Granted, most of the WWE product is largely geared toward wooing the casual fan in order to grow the audience, because the smart fan will most likely watch the product regardless (see e.g. Labar 2013). That being said, the smart fan's clout over the WWE product is undeniable.

At Wrestlemania 20 in 2004, Brock Lesnar wrestled Bill Goldberg in a highly anticipated match. However, a few days before the show, rumors about Lesnar's contract negotiations leaked to the public as Lesnar was aiming to abruptly quit wrestling and pursue a career in American football. On the day of the match it had become clear that it would be Lesnar's last in WWE for the foreseeable future. What WWE did not realize though was that the majority of the crowd in the sold-out Madison Square Garden in New York City was aware of the fact too. To the fans, Lesnar was a quitter and a diva, and the disapproval was audible during the match. Lesnar was greeted with chants of "You sold out!", among others. Both Lesnar and Goldberg were visibly taken aback by the

reception, and their performance suffered. The match was short and uneventful with Lesnar even at one point raising his middle fingers to the audience. WWE did not initially intend to reference the situation at all but at one point during the match the surreal atmosphere dictated that the announcers at least had to allude to it. (Online world of wrestling 2004.) Effectively, the real-world situation of Lesnar's contract negotiations seeped into the fictional world of wrestling through the participation of the smart crowd, changing the story of the match.

Not only are the most ardent WWE fans aware of backstage dealings, they also have their finger on the pulse of the independent wrestling scene in America and abroad. Today, an independent wrestler can create an entire oeuvre of well-known matches and build a following among the most passionate and vocal fans. Such buzz can make a wrestler a hot commodity for WWE to pursue. Admittedly, super fans are a minority among WWE's grander television audience, but they can have a role as taste makers, essentially singing the praises of some wrestlers at the expense of others. When a wrestler gains a following among the taste makers, the wrestler can essentially arrive to WWE already as a star in the eyes of the fans and the credibility he or she gleans on the independent circuit rarely ever dissipates. For instance, when Kevin Owens debuted on WWE's own "super indie" NXT in 2014 after performing on the indie scene for over a decade, he was already readily a star in the eyes of the fans, garnering an enormous ovation from the live crowd. Before the night was done, however, Owens had turned heel and become a vile, opportunistic character who figuratively stabbed his friend in the back in order to further his own career. The storyline was a huge success and eventually brought Owens to WWE's main television brand, Monday Night Raw, in 2015. To this day, Owens is greeted by live audiences with mostly cheers instead of boos, even though the character has very little redeeming qualities. This can be accounted to the audience's appreciation of Owens' charisma and ability to the extent that it does not matter if Owens portrays a heel. In addition, Owens' independent past is a factor, effectively making him a former starving artist and

thus a true rags-to-riches story; it is hard to boo an underdog. It follows that Kevin Owens' character is a pure villain that gets cheered by audiences, and this often creates a rather surreal situation in the fictional world of WWE.

Whereas wrestlers with independent credibility can face almost an inexplicable amount of support from audiences, the wrestlers that are more or less WWE's own creations can face the opposite. Today, WWE operates a wrestling school facility in Orlando, Florida where the company trains potential wrestlers and creates characters for them. Often the trainees have little or no prior experience and thus they are molded into performers directly by the industry leader. This creates the potential for a performer to debut on WWE television without any credibility in the eyes of the smart fans, the taste makers. One such wrestler is Roman Reigns whose character was introduced as a part of a heel group called The Shield by the side of two former independent stars: Dean Ambrose and Seth Rollins. The Shield was a successful act but after the group disbanded it became abundantly clear that Reigns was the wrestler WWE saw as having the greatest potential for superstardom and for becoming the franchise character of the company going forward. Soon after, the smart fans realized this, and the backlash Reigns got was unprecedented. Reigns has primarily portrayed a face for his entire solo career that began in 2014, but the audiences have not accepted him as such. Initially started by a few smart crowds at bigger shows, the majority of live crowds continue to boo Reigns to this day. Be that as it may, this has not stopped WWE from promoting Reigns as one of its most prominent heroes. WWE production also began to mute booing crowds, cut negative crowd reactions in post-production, and confiscate anti-Reigns signs (Varble 2017). As with Owens, the reception that Reigns gets from live audiences goes against the fictional truths of WWE in which Reigns is a hero that should be looked up to, not booed. In the case of Reigns, however, WWE has started to manipulate the part of the fictional world created by the crowd reactions. Some crowds have even directed the dreaded chant "You can't wrestle!" to Reigns. This is essentially a loud

and clear indictment on Reigns' ability to entertain his audience instead of his characters' ability to wrestle and win matches in the fictional world of WWE. For all intents and purposes, Reigns is a hard worker and a talented wrestler, but the narrative for his character was not created in the fictional world, but instead in the fact that the smart crowds have not accepted him. Reigns represents to them the type of industry created pop music that lacks true artistic merit that is earned toiling on the independents.

5.4 Corporate power vs. the united masses: the case of Daniel Bryan

In 2010, WWE mostly trained its own performers and built their characters from ground up, but Brian Danielson was an exception to this model. When Danielson debuted on WWE television in 2010, he had already wrestled on the indie scene for a decade. Danielson's reputation was that of the king of the independents, but he was always considered undersized and perhaps too bland of a personality for the mainstream. Danielson's credibility in the eyes of the smart fans was stellar, however. He had travelled the world, worked every style imaginable, and performed in front of tiny audiences despite of injuries. His WWE character was eventually dubbed Daniel Bryan so that the company would own the name under which Danielson performed. Interestingly, WWE had no qualms about making Bryan's indie past a part of his character even though his introduction was as a "rookie" on WWE's new reality competition television show, NXT. Bryan was mentored by The Miz, a former reality TV star turned WWE wrestler whose road to the big leagues could not have been any different from Bryan's. The Miz opened the show by telling the fans that Bryan was an "Internet darling", a derogatory term that meant someone beloved by the smart fan, and that in the minor leagues Bryan was indeed great, but he had to show personality if he was to succeed in the WWE. (WWE 2010.) The Miz's words echoed the general sentiment that WWE

was believed to hold that independent wrestlers were not the larger-than-life characters who could capture the imagination of the larger public, or the casual television viewer. Be that as it may, the tenuous relationship between WWE and the independent scene was now on display in the fictional world of WWE for the first time. The industry leader had acknowledged that there was a subculture of wrestling whose influence was undeniable.

The ultimate accomplishment in the WWE is to take part in the main event of Wrestlemania, the biggest show in the company's calendar. Indeed, the show transcends the fictional world of WWE, and subsequently the fictional world of wrestling as a whole, as in addition to being the ultimate goal for the characters it is the ultimate goal for the performers as well. Daniel Bryan's journey to the main event of the 30th annual Wrestlemania was an unlikely one. In between his debut in 2010 and Wrestlemania 30 in 2014, laboring mostly in preliminary matches, Bryan had cultivated his character into a slightly undersized face with an insatiable fire to prove his doubters wrong. He had a wild persona with the look to match: straggly brown hair and an unkept beard. Bryan would enter the arena to a hard-rock rendition of Wagner's Flight of the Valkyries while also thrusting his index fingers into the air and leading the audience to an undoubtedly simplistic chant of "Yes! Yes! Yes!" His in-ring style was dynamic and aggressive even to the point of recklessness, but he also displayed technical prowess beloved by the smart fans. Bryan's popularity had grown undeniable, and it led him to the WWE heavyweight championship in the main event of the Summerslam pay-per-view event in August of 2013. However, Bryan subsequently lost the title and was eventually, again, pushed to the background into a supporting role. According to sports writer Jonathan Snowden (Laine 2017, 40), Bryan did not bring about sufficient financial success as the main attraction of a major pay-per-view event. Vince McMahon, the CEO and creative force of WWE, himself told stockholders that Summerslam 2013 was a "swing and a miss" (Ibid.). Shortly after, WWE's now classic and hulking superheroesque face John Cena returned from injury and

reclaimed his spot as the company's main protagonist. It seemed that The Miz was right in 2010 and that Daniel Bryan lacked mainstream appeal. The popularity of Daniel Bryan never waned however, and his fans were hell-bent in showing their support. In other words, the stock market's opinion of Bryan was not shared by the attendant masses.

On the December 9th, 2013 edition of Monday Night Raw, WWE held a ceremony to unify the company's two main heavyweight championships as both were to be decided in a single match in following Sunday's pay-per-view event. The ceremony was preceded over by the wife-and-husband duo of Stephanie McMahon and Triple H, whose real name is Paul Levesque. The pair holds positions as WWE's Chief Brand Officer and Chief Operating Officer, respectively, but they also play nefarious versions of themselves on camera. In addition, Triple H is a semi-retired former champion wrestler. In order to push the importance of the match, the ceremony was also attended in-ring by a group of former heavyweight champions, Daniel Bryan included. The segment was to include scripted dialogue between McMahon, Triple H, and the participants of the championship match: John Cena and Randy Orton. The proceedings were however disrupted by the live audience in a way that highjacked the show, with the crowd beginning to relentlessly chant Daniel Bryan's name over the scripted speeches. Triple H, visibly flustered, had no choice but to acknowledge the crowd as Daniel Bryan snickered in the corner of the ring. (WWE 2013.) Bryan was supposed to have merely a background role in this part of the show, but the live audience thrusted him into the spotlight, much to the dismay of WWE production. It seemed that from this point forward, the WWE would have no choice but to give in to the groundswell, but instead it continued to push other talent at the expense of Bryan, almost as a direct insult to the viewing public.

On January 26th, 2014 WWE held its annual Royal Rumble pay-per-view event, headlined by the titular match that historically had determined the wrestler who was to challenge for the WWE championship at that year's

Wrestlemania. The Royal Rumble match is one in which 30 men enter the ring in 90 second intervals and are eliminated from the match when they are thrown over the top rope to the outside of the ring. The last man left in the ring, then, wins the match. Daniel Bryan had wrestled and lost in a preliminary match on the show, but the live audience clamored for Bryan to enter the Royal Rumble match as well, and the people were not shy about their support for him during the match, chanting for his name at every turn and booing almost everyone in the match. However, Bryan's appearance in the match was not to be, and when the 30th and final participant, fan favorite Rey Mysterio, entered the match, the crowd proceeded to ruthlessly boo him. The atmosphere in the arena from this point onward was surreal as the crowd loudly expressed its disapproval for everything they saw. Eventually, the match was won by a returning face, Batista, whose angry expression over not being accepted by the crowd was evident. (WWE 2014a.) Going forward, WWE could no longer deny the live audience's power over the fictional world they were presented with. The audience wanted Daniel Bryan and if the WWE continued to rob the people of him, it would do it at the risk of having its upcoming marquee event, Wrestlemania, hijacked as well.

Originally, Wrestlemania 30 was to be headlined by Batista, a face, challenging the heel champion, Randy Orton, with both being former proteges of Triple H. However, WWE flipped the script and suddenly pushed Daniel Bryan to the forefront of the story on the March 10th, 2014 episode of Monday Night Raw. That night, Bryan gathered a group of his fans, filled up the ring in the middle of the arena, and demanded Triple H for a match at Wrestlemania 30. It would be a match which, if Bryan was to win, would earn him a spot in the main event of the show as the third participant in the WWE championship match. The character of Daniel Bryan literally hijacked the fictional television show just like the audience had symbolically done before. WWE called it *Occupy Raw* as a nod to the Occupy Wall Street movement. The angered Triple H, as the symbol of corporate power forced to its knees by the united masses, eventually agreed to the match, setting

the stage for Bryan to triumph against all odds. (WWE 2014b.) Essentially, WWE appropriated the real-life grass-roots movement behind Daniel Bryan and made it a grand story in the fictional world they were presenting at the time. The fact that it legitimately took WWE so long to acknowledge the fans only magnified the ultimate climax of the story. Daniel Bryan went on to open Wrestlemania 30 by defeating Triple H, and then closed the show by defeating both of his proteges, Batista and Orton, and winning the WWE championship in front of 75.000 fans (Caldwell 2014).

Whether Daniel Bryan's appeal indeed transcended the attending smart fan and crossed over to the mainstream can be debated. Wrestlemania 30 was a financial success, but it is hard to say whether it was due to Bryan or just due to Wrestlemania being the biggest event in WWE's calendar, as all Wrestlemanias are touted as successes (Ibid.). What cannot be debated, however, is that the live audiences of this time in part dictated the primary story that WWE was to tell them. The people wanted to see the corporate juggernaut that is WWE on its knees in front of them in the fictional world as well as in real-life. Granted, WWE ultimately reaped the financial rewards, but the empowerment the audience felt as Daniel Bryan got his Wrestlemania moment was palpable.

5.5 Tokenism or citizen control? – professional wrestling as participatory art

According to Barthes' *World of Wrestling* (2005, 23), perhaps the most eminent writing on the subject, wrestling is a spectacle. Yet, according to Claire Bishop, a spectacle requires its audience to be uninvolved and inactive as opposed to one that engages itself in true social change (see e.g. 4.1). Whether the wrestling audience engages in true social change or not, it is clear that it is extremely active, involved, and engaged in its experience. This goes against Barthes' notion of wrestling being spectacle, or perhaps Barthes' definition of spectacle merely goes

against Bishop's definition. Indeed, spectacle seems to evade a cut-and-dry definition. For example, Boris Groys refers to social media as a "spectacle without spectators" (Bishop 2011, 2). Also, Bishop (2011, 6), referring to social media, at times contradicts her own definition and says that participation has evolved into something that is in fact not the opposite of spectacle:

> *In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of banal egos. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.*

Bishop refers to a kind of participation that she herself finds banal and therefore merely makes a judgement in taste. Participation is there, but she just does not seem to agree with the product. It seems that for Bishop, spectacle has very fluid boundaries, but it remains as the boogeyman of choice for the critic. Perhaps the professional wrestling audience is engaging in the kind of participation that Bishop would find banal or abhorrent: people chanting solely to entertain themselves and taking the focus from the art they are consuming (see e.g. 5.2). However, this does not change the fact that it is indeed participation. It should be examined, then, whether professional wrestling can be analyzed as participatory art.

Professional wrestling operates outside the art world. Further, it does not seem to fall neatly into any cultural sphere. Bishop states that participatory art is problematic to pin down because it aims to amalgamate art with communal life but cannot achieve this inside the realm of the arts (see 4.1). Professional wrestling seems to have found a recipe of participation that bridges this divide, as it is a form of performance which has historically and organically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents. Professional wrestling engages its audience not because of an extraneous agreement, as in the case of Deller's *Battle of Orgreave*, but because audience participation is an integral part of it. It seems that in professional wrestling the Rancièrian "third term" is not there or at least its role is successfully diminished.

Bishop emphasizes that participatory art more often than not aims to create palpable change in the community as opposed to being merely aesthetic, and he lists both Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* and Roberts' *What's the Time in Vyborg?* as examples (see 4.1). It cannot be claimed, under any reasonable standards, that mainstream professional wrestling creates palpable communal change in such a way, as it clearly is not the goal of any professional wrestling project to do so. But as one can observe from the example of Daniel Bryan, professional wrestling can empower its audience. It could be said that this feeling of empowerment affects the audiences' lives in other aspects as well, but this seems to be mere speculation which is not the purpose of the study at hand. However, the potential is there, even if professional wrestling seems to fall short of Bishop's ideal.

Bishop would perhaps also argue that professional wrestling fails to be anti-capitalist which, for her, is historically a central function of participatory art. Indeed, professional wrestling is first and foremost a business of show. Neither in the central story of wrestling or in the mind of the wrestling promoter can one find anti-capitalist sentiments. Perhaps for a brief moment, Daniel Bryan brought the fictional corporate giant that is WWE on its knees but at the end of the day, Wrestlemania 30 was a huge financial success and the fans gladly paid their money for the product they consumed that night. Be that as it may, WWE does not equal to professional wrestling, for it is also performed in the smallest of venues for little or no compensation, often just for the enjoyment of the performance. In the crowd of a small, independent show the experience is visceral and intimate. It can be an affordable communal form of entertainment, produced with passion and heart. Again, it is tempting to say that the potential for an anti-capitalist function exists in professional wrestling, if that indeed is what participatory art is all about.

According to Bishop, it is in participatory art's nature to be anti-establishment (see 4.1). As we can gather from the case of Daniel Bryan's raise to

prominence in WWE, it can be argued that professional wrestling is fruitful ground for organic anti-establishment thinking. The audiences demanded, with clear intent, for their working-class hero to prevail, even though it was not in the plans of WWE to give its audience this story. As is often the case, this sentiment seeped into the fictional world of WWE and eventually the audience got its wish. It seems that in professional wrestling it is possible to realize ambitions of change, even if these achievements just remain in the world of wrestling. As discussed above, wrestling might not achieve true communal change, but its ability to create symbolic change is not in doubt.

For Rancière, theater is inherently evil because being a spectator is inherently a bad thing and viewing is the opposite of acting. Rancière also posits that theater as-is prevents the realization of the "unpredictable subject", whose ultimate realm would be a "new theater". This would essentially be a theater without spectators but with a knowing, acting community audience. (See 4.3.) The professional wrestling audience seems to exhibit such traits. Indeed, the professional wrestling audience is not disinterested, but knowing (see 5.3). Also, the professional wrestling audience is capable of becoming truly unpredictable and taking liberties that seem to be outside of the role that it had originally been given, as in the case of Daniel Bryan, for example. Naturally, the role of a professional wrestling audience is restricted to the role of the audience in the fictional world of professional wrestling. The guard rail that separates the ringside area from the crowd is a line that should never be crossed by a customer. The crowd can chant "You can't wrestle!" to Roman Reigns but it itself cannot wrestle either.

What remains, then, is to answer the question: *where on the ladder of participation does professional wrestling fall*? Is the wrestling audience given just a thin slimmer of power correlating to mere tokenism, or is the audience capable of rising above that and seizing citizen control? We have learned that in particular situations, the professional wrestling audience can rise above tokenism. This

dynamic is built into the fact that professional wrestling is a form of performance that has historically and organically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents. However, in this fictional world, the wrestling audience has a strict role with limits, and true participation can have no limits. This does not mean, however, that wrestling fails to find a recipe of participation that could finally realize the Rancièrian unpredictable subject in the communal audience of a new theater.

Conclusion

I have been in the attendance of a sold-out WWE pay-per-view event in the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. I sat in the very last row, far removed from the action in the ring. It was easy to imagine why Barthes called wrestling a spectacle of excess as I witnessed the grand production values of WWE, but the experience was also extremely participatory. I was pushed to be a vocal part of the audience of 17.000, cheering for my favorites and mercilessly booing the ones I did not like. I felt like I was a vital part of a misunderstood community, a fanbase whose passion is an often-ridiculed form of subculture. I have also had the pleasure of seeing a live wrestling event in a barely half-filled taxi garage in Oaxaca, Mexico. That time I got to sit in the front row where I was flirted with by a sexually ambiguous glitter and pink clad Mexican wrestler, or "luchador", called Rasputin. A few moments later, Rasputin, in the heat of the action, was thrown out of the ring right into my lap. Indeed, this event was intimate, and the experience visceral. As the wrestlers brawled among the fans, I was urged to hand the metal foldout chair I was sitting on to one of them. He struck his opponent with it, then handed it back to me. This all happened while the wives of the organizers and wrestlers were selling beer and home-made popcorn in one corner of the so-called arena. During the breaks between matches the children in the audience were encouraged to use the wrestling ring as a jungle gym. While my experiences in New York City and in Oaxaca were in many ways polar opposites, neither of them left me passive, uninvolved, or inactive. In the Barclays Center I felt like part of a community. In the taxi-garage in Oaxaca I felt like part of a family.

We learned in chapter 1 that professional wrestling has its roots in legitimate combat sports, but it has never subscribed to the notion that sports and show business should be kept apart. Indeed, professional wrestling always evolved with the business of show as the main driving force. WWE prevailed from the many styles of professional wrestling promoted throughout the United States

during the 20th century, and it is now almost synonymous with the word "wrestling" when it comes to attracting the casual viewer. This is not to say that there is not a diverse underground scene on the rise regarding independent wrestling. It is a scene that is actively and successfully challenging the way WWE currently presents professional wrestling to the masses.

In chapter 2, I attempted to categorize professional wrestling as a genre of entertainment. I found professional wrestling to be a rich mixture of sports, theater, dance, and finally performance art. However, the uniqueness of the form of professional wrestling makes its analysis difficult with existing tools. Professional wrestling may not be easily explained as a phenomenon, but a thorough account of the genre was not the main purpose of this study. Wrestling prevails as an oddball subculture whose inescapable weirdness may even challenge our views on more celebrated forms of fiction and further forms of representational art.

In that vein, chapter 3 provided an explanation for representational arts as fictional worlds as defined by Kendall Walton. I also analyzed the fictional world presented by professional wrestling and argued that it is in fact remarkably uniform with fictional truths shared throughout all professional wrestling products. It would not be unthinkable to argue that the genre of professional wrestling is a unified piece of representational art with a shared mythology. This is a byproduct of organically evolving from nonfiction to fiction, from a legitimate sport into a fictional sport. I also argued that through this process, professional wrestling has engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents.

Chapter 4 was a summary of prevailing theories pertaining to participation and art, most notably by Claire Bishop and Jacques Rancière. This was done in the hope of gleaning tools for analyzing participatory arts and their motivations and goals. For Bishop, participatory art is first and foremost an anti-capitalist endeavor to make art a part of communal life as opposed to a spectacle. For

Rancière, true participation is not realized through theater, because theater is inherently evil as it prevents knowing and action. Theater is the spectacle, the third term standing in the way of participation. The Rancièrian ideal would be an "unpredictable subject" whose realm would be a "new theater", an exemplary form with a knowing, acting community audience.

Utilizing the theories by Bishop and Rancière, chapter 5 analyzed the different trends of participation in professional wrestling. I expounded upon the notion that audience participation is, in part, motivated by knowledge beyond the fictional truths presented to them; for instance, the performers' individual careers and different journeys into the limelight. We learned that the scope of the power of the professional wrestling audience is such that on several occasions it has had the ability to shape the fictional world presented to it. This is made possible by the fact that the professional wrestling audience is a key element in the fictional world of professional wrestling.

Professional wrestling is, by no means, a perfect form. Mainstream professional wrestling often depicts a deplorable world where violence is celebrated, and questionable tactics are encouraged. Sometimes even the most virtuous face can come off as a bully. Such is life, and in its most popular form professional wrestling is a morality play. In its core, however, professional wrestling portrays a fictional combat sport and it succeeds in depicting symbolic triumphs of the human will. When Daniel Bryan won the WWE championship in the main event of Wrestlemania 30, I remember watching the show on my knees on the floor of my living room with tears in my eyes. I knew I had just witnessed a completely fictional and predetermined sporting event with the most obvious outcome imaginable, but I did not care. The story was inspiring, and my knowledge of Brian Danielson's journey to the show made the victory feel real. It was beyond fiction to me. Further, ignoring all of its extraneous story elements, professional wrestling, in other words what happens in the ring, is a rich and complex form of storytelling. This form, in my opinion, is worth further research

that goes beyond scrutinizing the mixture of soap opera and sport, or “masculine melodrama”, depicted on television under the genre term of wrestling.

The role of the audience in professional wrestling is undoubtedly interesting and provides a fruitful ground for further research as well. Rancière called theater an exemplary communal form but demanded theater to evolve into something in which true participation is possible. This is not accomplished through auxiliary contracts between the author and the audience which always brings about mere tokenism. In professional wrestling, such auxiliary contracts are not needed as the professional wrestling audience is an entity inside the fictional world with which it is presented. Indeed, on the surface it seems that the professional wrestling audience has power beyond tokenism and at least the potential to demonstrate traits of an “unpredictable subject”.

Perhaps it would be possible to realize a fictional audience within the form of theater as well; not through interaction but through absolute integration. This integration should be a natural occurrence and not a product of an auxiliary contract between the author and the audience. Perhaps, then and only then, the Rancièrian new theater with a knowing, acting community audience could be realized. Professional wrestling could indeed hold this recipe or perhaps only just a few key ingredients.

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